THE Nation.

‘LIBERAL ELITISTS’
Eric Alterman

RUSSELL BANKS’S *RESERVE*
Melissa Holbrook Pierson

HOW ARCANE FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS AND UNREGULATED WALL STREET GREED COULD PLUNGE US INTO A DEPRESSION—AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

APRIL 14, 2008
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Letters

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OBAMA'S MERCENARY POSITION
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IN THE SHADOW OF NAFTA, DEMOCRATS WOO THE WORKING CLASS

Kaffeeklatsch: The Woman or the Black?

San Francisco
What in the world are those women doing, sitting with the good china in anguish over the way the choice between Clinton and Obama is impinging on their relationships ["Morning in America," March 17]? It's ridiculous for enlightened people to be caught up in the surface qualities of blackness and femaleness in this campaign. Only think of Margaret Thatcher or Clarence Thomas, or cap it off with the worst of both worlds, Condoleezza Rice. "It's a class struggle, goddammit!" (Fred Hampton). Both breakthrough candidates have shown themselves to be committed to the warmongering, mass-murdering, tax-avoiding, corporate-control-enhancing Mammonite elite that has ruled this country since Shays's Rebellion was neutralized.
Dennis Cunningham

Simpsonville, S.C.
I am an African-American woman. I have lived with discrimination of both race and gender. I have been called a black bitch. Has Gloria Steinem ever been called a white bitch? That women collectively are the most oppressed group may be true. However, white women of a certain class continue to benefit from white privilege.

To tell me I have to support Hillary Clinton because she is a woman is the most sordid type of identity politics. I support Obama but not because he is black. (I consider him biracial like my daughters, 12 and 10, who are excited by his candidacy. He is not African-American in a classic sense because he has no slave ancestry.) If I supported Obama because of his race, I would also have voted for Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, which I did not.
Carmen Harris

As Ohio Turns…

Montross, Va.
I commend *The Nation* on JoAnn Wypijewski's "Postcards From Ohio" [March 17]. It is by far, by very far, the most informative, moving, thought-provoking and well-written piece I've encountered related to this election. Thank you.
John Boddie

'Muslim' Is Not a Four-Letter Word

Boise, Idaho
Naomi Klein is right, of course ["Obama, Being Called a Muslim Is Not a Smear," March 17]. Implicitly denouncing a candidate for association, albeit untrue, with a particular religion amounts to smearing the religion. When I joined a crowd of 14,000 to hear Obama speak here in Boise (in a state where Democrats are regarded as subversive), I paid very close attention when he brought up the Muslim "slur." If he did not speak to the underlying bigotry, I would not support him. I was relieved to hear him say the innuendo was insulting to all Muslims.
Susan Nichols

Jackson Heights, N.Y.
I agree that one's religion should not become a political albatross, whether you are Muslim, Mormon, Catholic or what have you. As a Korean-American, I'm well aware of why it's so difficult for minorities. Senator Obama is in the extremely difficult position of having to create the perception of being a political everyman, devoid of ethnocentric interest while maintaining pride (but not too much) in his ethnic identity. If he pulls too far one way, he might be seen as a sellout to whites; if he pulls too far the other way (i.e., rallying to the plight of misrepresented Muslims), he could be perceived as a fringe candidate for blacks or minority issues in general.

A white candidate has the luxury of appearing "impartial" when dispensing political action among minority groups he needs to get elected and can't be accused of being "too white" or "not white enough." It's regrettable that we live in a country where even a hint at Muslim ties would have to be an object of condemnation by a politician.
Edward Pontee

letters@thenation.com

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End the War: Try Again

On the late afternoon of the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, a grim, surreal procession made its way up DC's Capitol Hill. Down Independence Avenue alongside the House office buildings marched a single file of protesters, each clad in a black T-shirt, wearing a haunting white mask and holding a sign with the name of a civilian killed in Iraq. As they trudged up the Hill, a drummer rapped out a spare and mournful beat. Aside from several police escorts on bicycles, few were there to bear witness. Congress was in recess, the usual passel of commuters away or shuttered indoors, the streets empty under a misting gray sky. Like the real-life funerals for the Iraqi dead they represented, this re-creation, too, would pass with hardly a notice.

EDITORIAL

That morning in Washington, as protesters marched and danced and chanted, as progressives assembled for the Take Back America conference and as thousands of soldiers' families mourned their dead, Vice President Cheney gave an interview to ABC's Martha Raddatz. When she pointed out that two-thirds of Americans thought the war was not worth fighting, he answered: "So?"

"*So?*" Raddatz replied. "You don't care what the American people think?"

"No," said Cheney.

There you have it. To the millions who marched before the war began, to the hundreds of thousands who have protested since, to the tens of millions who voted for candidates in 2006 who pledged to end it, the Bush Administration says, more or less, Go fuck yourself.

We are now faced with two problems. One is a war that grinds on, subject only to its internal logic, each day further embedding an imperial occupation. The other is arguably even more profound, a terrifying breakdown in the basic mechanisms of democracy whereby the will of the majority is transferred into policy. We have two ostensible democracies (the United States and Iraq), each with a polity that wants an end to the war (the most recent polling from Iraq shows that 70 percent of Iraqis favor US withdrawal), yet the war does not end.

In the face of this official indifference to public opinion, it is tempting to succumb to despair. The antiwar strategy, after all, has not been static. In the run-up to the war, organizers managed to pull together the largest simultaneous worldwide demonstrations in history. That didn't work. Then the antiwar movement channeled much of its energy into electoral politics, helping to elect Democratic majorities in both houses. That hasn't worked either. So we find ourselves in the situation of Beckett's protagonist in *Worstward Ho*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Although the electoral strategy has not yet borne fruit, it is still the most viable option, barring a draft or a radical turn in public opinion that would once again bring people en masse into the streets. (There are, of course, parallel strategies to be pursued. Passing a ban on mercenaries in Iraq would make the occupation untenable.) The question, then, becomes how to create the electoral conditions that maximize the power and representation of the majority who want the war ended. The antiwar caucus doesn't have enough votes to override a delusional President or enough members willing to bear the political risk of cutting off funding for the war. The solution to this impasse is, in the words of Congressional candidate Darcy Burner, to elect "more and better Democrats"—Democrats who have publicly committed to pursuing a legislative strategy to end the war.

So at Take Back America, Burner—a former Microsoft manager from the Seattle suburbs who narrowly missed unseating a GOP incumbent in 2006—with

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NEWS & ANALYSIS

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Jeremy Brecher et al.: How green is your collar?

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NATION POLL

What's ahead for the economy?

VIDEO NATION

Winter soldier testimony

AROUND THE NATION

Publicize events of interest to progressives on our calendar

nine other Democratic Congressional challengers released *A Responsible Plan to End the War*. Developed in collaboration with retired military officers and national security professionals, the plan attracted the support of fifteen additional Democratic Senate and House challengers in the first week after it was unveiled (see ResponsiblePlan.com). Unlike the withdrawal plans offered by both Democratic presidential candidates, the *Responsible Plan* opposes any residual forces as well as permanent military bases. It flatly states, "We must stop counter-productive military operations by U.S. occupation forces, and end our military presence in Iraq." It looks toward restoring "Constitutional checks and balances and fix[ing] the ways in which our governmental, military, and civil institutions have failed us." It also addresses the need to take responsibility for a humanitarian crisis in which thousands of Iraqis who worked with US forces are in danger and millions are displaced across the region.

As an organizer working on the *Responsible Plan* stressed to me, it is an explicitly legislative road map, to be pursued by Congress with or without a President committed to withdrawal. Among other actions the plan calls for war funding to be brought into the normal budgetary process, as opposed to the ersatz emergency supplementals, which detach the cost of the war from the rest of the nation's discretionary spending. The plan also highlights more than a dozen bills that have already been introduced, like HR 2247, the Montgomery GI Bill for Life Act of 2007, which the signatories would support if elected.

Meanwhile, in Iraq on March 23, the 4,000th US service member was killed (twenty-five died in just two weeks), at least fifty-eight Iraqi civilians died in attacks, the Green Zone was shelled, violence flared in Basra and Muqtada al-Sadr seemed to be toying with the idea of revoking his militia's cease-fire. American generals presented a plan to maintain post-surge troop levels through 2008, and George W. Bush continued to pursue an agreement with the Iraqi government that would keep US troops there well into the future.

At the plan's unveiling, Burner—articulate, impressive and infectiously energetic—refused to be pessimistic. Despite the White House's indifference, despite the war's diminished presence on the front page, the people want the war to end.

"We can do this," she said.

Ever tried. Try again.

CHRISTOPHER HAYES

For a Social Bailout

COMMENT

The bailout of Wall Street banks began a while ago, when the Federal Reserve and the Treasury doled out easy loans. But on March 16 the scope of the rescue widened dramatically, with the Fed absorbing the losses at Bear Stearns, backing its sale at a heavily discounted price to JPMorgan Chase and announcing its willingness to make further loans to the rest of the Street against worthless collateral. The banks are being saved partly because they have friends in the right places but also because the failure of even one investment bank would undermine the others and spread havoc in the real economy.

In contemplating what should be done, consider an earlier episode in the unfolding crisis. Between November 2007 and

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Noted.

KUDOS: With a wave of recent awards and nominations, *The Nation* continues to earn praise for its reporting and criticism in 2007. Books & Arts contributor **William Deresiewicz** was honored with a National Magazine Award nomination for Reviews and Criticism, recognizing "the knowledge, persuasiveness and original voice that the critic brings to his or her reviews." Deresiewicz earned the nod for his reviews of books by Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Clive James and Junot Díaz.

Reporter **Joshua Kors** received wide acclaim for his investigation into a pattern of benefit denials by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Kors won an Investigative Reporters and Editors Magazine Certificate for "outstanding investigative work" and was nominated for a National Magazine Award in Public Interest for his reporting. In early March Kors won the National Headliner Award for coverage of a major news event, and he is a finalist for the Michael Kelly Award, given in honor of the *Atlantic* editor killed in Iraq in 2003.

Washington correspondent **John Nichols** was given the Milt Hakel Award by the National Farmers Union for his commitment to farming and trade reform. Farmers Union president Tom Buis praised Nichols for reporting that "gives readers a balanced portrayal of the complex issues affecting rural America."

Finally, *Nation* contributor **Jeremy Scahill** won a James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism for his coverage of Blackwater. The Aronsons are presented annually to "journalism that measures business, governmental and social affairs against clear ideals of the common good."

MEDIA MIA: When a CBS reporter was embedded with Jon Michael Turner's unit in Ramadi in 2006, she missed a big part of the action. The reporter was shadowing another squad when Turner, amped up on adrenaline after a firefight, shot and killed an unarmed Iraqi man riding his bicycle. Marines dumped the man's body behind a concrete wall and threw his bicycle on top of him. It was not by chance that no cameras were there to capture the killing. "Anytime we did have embedded reporters with us, our actions would change drastically," Turner explained. "We were always on key with everything, did everything by the books."

Journalists looking for an unsanitized version of the Iraq War were invited to attend **Winter Soldier**, four days of stark testimony by veterans, including Turner, about war crimes and atrocities they witnessed or committed. Unfortunately, most members of America's mainstream press rejected the offer. Winter Soldier did receive wide coverage from international and independent media. **Pacifica Radio** broadcast the testimony live, and **Democracy Now!** aired a significant portion of it. Outlets from **BBC Arabic** radio to the British **Guardian** and **Al Jazeera English** covered it. But the US news outlets that packaged and sold the Iraq War largely ignored the Winter Soldiers, just as they did when dissident Vietnam veterans testified about their combat nightmares thirty-seven years ago. There was no coverage of the hearings in the **New York Times** or on any of the major broadcast or cable news networks. LAILA AL-ARIAN

A SPEAKER FOR TIBET? **Nancy Pelosi** is rarely accused of putting morality ahead of politics. But the House Speaker's response to China's brutal crackdown on Tibetan dissidents had the proper clarity. Pelosi traveled to the Tibetan exile community of Dharamsala, India, to stand with the **Dalai Lama**. "If freedom-loving people throughout the world do not speak out against China's oppression [of] Tibet, we have lost all moral authority to speak on behalf of human rights anywhere in the world," she declared.

Pelosi is no newcomer to this fight—in 2000 she opposed improved trade relations with China because of concerns about human rights abuses. In Dharamsala she stopped short of speculating about an Olympics boycott—unlike European Parliament president **Hans-Gert Pottering**, who said he sees "boycott measures as justified." But Chinese officials still attacked the Speaker and other "human rights police." Pelosi's strong words stand in marked contrast to **President Bush**'s tepid phone call to Chinese President **Hu Jintao** in which he raised concerns and encouraged dialogue. But neither the White House nor Wall Street really cares to discuss morality in the context of trade relations or the Olympics. From Capitol Hill, however, came praise and prodding. "If China wants to host the Olympics this summer, an event that embodies the promise of the youth of the world, then China must begin to exhibit the moral leadership that goes with such an honor," said Congressman **Keith Ellison**. "If China does not demonstrate the moral leadership required, we should utilize every economic and moral tool at the world's disposal to reprimand China accordingly." JOHN NICHOLS

MEASURES OF LOSS: On March 23 the US command in Baghdad confirmed the deaths of four soldiers in Iraq, putting the US death toll at 4,000 troops—97 percent of whom died after President Bush declared "mission accomplished." That milestone, however grim, only hints at the human suffering caused by the Iraq War. Since its start in March 2003, more than 1,123 private contractors have been killed—casualties not included in the official military tally. As of February 28, 29,275 troops had been wounded in hostile combat; more than 500 US soldiers had lost limbs, not including fingers or toes.

Of course, Iraqis have suffered most. At press time, **Iraq Body Count**—which documents and cross-checks fatalities—reported 82,418–89,938 violent civilian deaths. Others, using survey methods, put the toll far higher. A report by the **World Health Organization** and the **Iraq Health Ministry** estimated 104,000–230,000 civilian deaths from March 2003 to June 2006. Researchers from Johns Hopkins University, using cluster sampling and extrapolation methods commonly employed in conflict zones, found 601,027 "excess" violent deaths in the same time period. Meanwhile, the **UN High Commissioner for Refugees** estimates that more than 4.5 million Iraqis have been displaced by the conflict, more than 2.5 million internally and more than 2 million to neighboring states.

Asked about the 4,000 figure, President Bush said that the war's outcome "will merit the sacrifice," a callous claim to which the statistics from Iraq give the lie.

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January 2008 several stricken banks—Citigroup and Merrill Lynch being the largest—were recapitalized by infusions of some $70 billion from a string of foreign "sovereign wealth funds." Countries like Norway, Australia, China, Singapore and Dubai have been building up "future funds"—pools of social wealth that give the state room for maneuver and can be devoted to a variety of uses—in part by acquiring preferred stock in the troubled US banks in return for their cash investments.

Elementary justice requires that the big investment banks pay a price for Washington's bailout, which could well top $100 billion. The Federal Reserve or Treasury, like the sovereign wealth funds, should receive preferred stock in the banks proportionate to the help they receive. The stock would not be sold but rather transferred to a regional network of autonomous social funds, which would benefit from future dividends on the stock. It could be handed, for instance, to the network of state-level Social Security and Medicare trust funds.

The deregulators and banks brought on the crisis through their irresponsible behavior. The 1999 repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act—which separated investment banking from commercial banking—destroyed a defense against speculation. In 2004–05, researching a book about "how finance is failing us," I was shocked to discover that swanky Wall Street concerns had bought up a string of loan sharks—subprime lenders, some of whom had been convicted in court of predatory lending. The banks preferred bad assets to good, as they could be bought cheap and then repackaged as fancy financial products with triple A ratings. The alchemy of financial legerdemain could supposedly turn dross into gold but could do nothing for precious metal itself.

New legislation should ban investment banks from personal finance and encourage them to get back to financing domestic investment in manufacturing and infrastructure. A good model would be Norway, hit by a banking crisis in 1988–92. The government took over the failing banks, expropriating the owners, and restored them to viability. It then used the proceeds and oil revenues to set up a pension fund, now worth roughly $390 billion. This fund is invested in accordance with a published set of criteria, embracing diversification, prudence and ethics.

In World War II the US government pumped huge resources into war production and in return took equity, held by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. After the war these holdings were simply sold. After the savings-and-loan debacle the Resolution Trust Corporation was set up in 1989 to bail out bankrupt S&Ls, which it then sold off—with the proceeds disappearing into the budget deficit. These are highly flawed models. The RTC bailouts subsidized the banking sector in an opaque way and without needed re-regulation (as Joseph Stiglitz and Bruce Greenwald point out in *Towards a New Paradigm in Monetary Economics*).

In the twenty-first century, social funds should be built up, not run down, and they should be obliged to operate in a transparent and accountable way. Future funds can help finance badly needed programs while also furnishing a democratic lever over big business. The credit crunch and recession will bring many problems—but something will have been gained if this opportunity to reinvent progressive economic policy is recognized and acted upon.

ROBIN BLACKBURN

Robin Blackburn, distinguished visiting professor at the New School for Social Research, is the author of Age Shock: How Finance Is Failing Us.

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

What Real Straight Talk From McCain Would Sound Like on The Fifth Anniversary Of the Iraq War

It's going very well, my friends.
Our triumphs now are bound to grow.
The worst five years are over, friends.
That leaves just ninety-five to go.

Health Policy Placebos

We don't administer useless nostrums for curable cancer—even when effective treatment is arduous. Yet Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama prescribe the health policy equivalent of placebos. (John McCain suggests arsenic, but more about him another time.)

COMMENT

The Democratic contenders proffer a superficially plausible reform model that has a long record of failure. Their proposals trace back to Nixon's 1971 employer mandate scheme, concocted to woo moderate Republicans away from Ted Kennedy's single-payer plan. Like mandate reforms subsequently passed (and failed) in Massachusetts (1988), Oregon (1989) and Washington (1993), Clinton's and Obama's plans would couple subsidies for the poor with a requirement that large employers foot part of the bill for employee coverage. These earlier reforms also required the self-employed to buy coverage, an individual mandate that Clinton (like the 2006 Massachusetts reform) would expand to virtually all; Obama limits his mandate to children. In both versions, a federal agency would serve as insurance broker, selling a new public plan and a menu of private ones—reprising the format of Medicare's ongoing privatization, implemented through competition rigged to favor private plans [see Trudy Lieberman, "The Medicare Privatization Scam," July 16/23, 2007].

The earlier state reforms foundered on the shoals of cost. As health spending soared, employers rebelled and legislators rescinded the mandates and subsidies. Massachusetts looks set to replay this experience; only 7 percent of those required to buy unsubsidized coverage have yet to sign up, while the state wrestles with massive cost overruns for subsidies.

Proposals that rely on private insurers can add coverage only by adding costs. Both Democrats promise savings from computerization, prevention and chronic disease–care management. Yet medical computing hasn't yielded savings, despite thirty years of rosy promises. As for prevention, a raft of studies show

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that it saves lives but not money. And the Medicare Health Support program recently abandoned its care management project because it yielded no savings.

Both Democrats' proposals forgo the administrative savings possible under single-payer national health insurance (NHI) such as that proposed by the Conyers/Kucinich bill (HR 676) and by Ralph Nader. Bureaucracy consumes 31 percent of US health spending, versus 17 percent in Canada. The difference translates into $350 billion frittered away annually here, where a million healthcare workers, as well as hundreds of thousands in the insurance industry, spend their days on useless paperwork.

This waste is a natural byproduct of private insurance. Private plan overhead is eleven times that of Canada's NHI program. Each dollar spent on private premiums buys only 88 cents of care; the rest pays for insurers' marketing, underwriting, utilization reviewers and profits—and for the billions paid to their CEOs. Fragmented coverage also means duplication of claims-processing facilities and mountains of paperwork for doctors and hospitals, which must deal with multiple insurance products each with its own eligibility rules, co-payments, referral networks, etc.—tasks that are absent in Canada. Our multiplicity of insurers also precludes the payment to hospitals of a global, lump-sum budget. In Canada global budgets obviate the need for most hospital billing and much of the internal accounting needed to attribute costs to individual patients and payers.

Clinton's and Obama's plans also lack credible means to redirect the hundreds of billions now wasted on overtreatment. Hospitals, doctors and equipment firms profit from investments in expensive high-tech care, encouraging the overuse of interventions that help some patients but harm others—for example, spine surgery, cardiac stents and CAT scans (which often deliver radiation equivalent to 500 chest X-rays). Insurers limit their outlays through intrusive case-by-case reviews or by raising co-payments. But they have little interest in systemwide cost control, so their efforts have mainly shifted costs to patients or other payers—the economic equivalent of squeezing a balloon. In contrast, NHI would allow explicit public decision-making about today's capital investments that shape tomorrow's care, and straightforward mechanisms to limit profit.

Without savings, the tax increases Obama and Clinton propose would be eaten up by subsidies for the uninsured, leaving nothing for the majority of Americans already covered but often unable to afford care. As we found in a 2005 study with Elizabeth Warren and Deborah Thorne, three-quarters of the 750,000 families driven to bankruptcy each year by illness or medical bills had coverage, though with unaffordable co-payments, deductibles and uncovered services. NHI would eliminate these gaps.

Private insurers caused the healthcare crisis. Yet both Democratic contenders advocate reforms that would fortify private plans, making government their debt collector. Their proposals, while palatable to the health industry—which supplies the Democrats with huge donations as well as key officials (DNC credentials committee co-chair James Roosevelt moonlights as an insurance company CEO)—cannot cure our healthcare crisis.

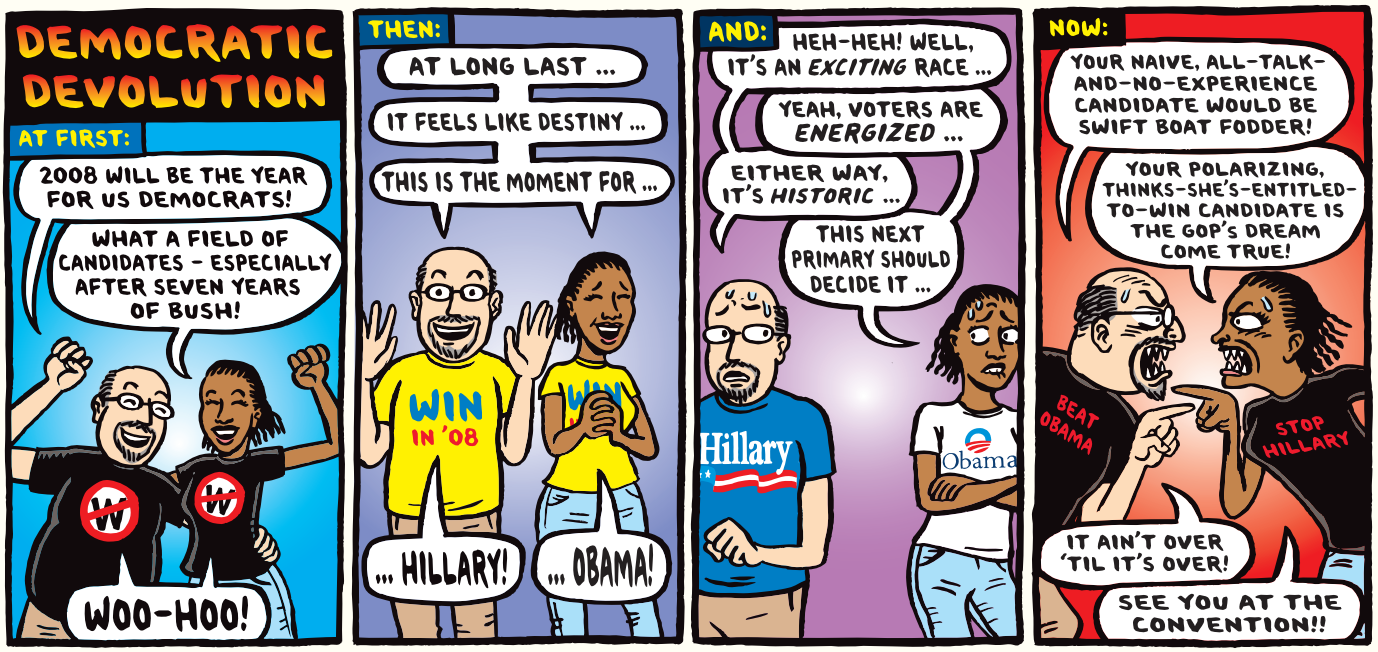
Nonetheless, we're optimistic about the prognosis for healthcare reform. If you turn up the volume on C-SPAN you can hear the audience cheering whenever Clinton or Obama lets the words "single payer" slip out—a reflection of the fact that three-fifths of the general public, as well as the 124,000-member American College of Physicians, support NHI. As in the JFK era, a charismatic, if only tepidly liberal, candidate can help raise hopes and expectations, igniting a mass movement that pushes a progressive agenda further and faster than the candidate intends.

DAVID U. HIMMELSTEIN AND STEFFIE WOOLHANDLER

David U. Himmelstein and Steffie Woolhandler, primary-care doctors in Cambridge, Massachusetts, teach at Harvard Medical School. They co-founded Physicians for a National Health Program.

Comix Nation

by WARD SUTTON


DEMOCRATIC DEVOLUTION
AT FIRST:
2008 WILL BE THE YEAR FOR US DEMOCRATS!
WHAT A FIELD OF CANDIDATES - ESPECIALLY AFTER SEVEN YEARS OF BUSH!
WOO-HOO!
THEN:
AT LONG LAST ...
IT FEELS LIKE DESTINY ...
THIS IS THE MOMENT FOR ...
WIN IN '08
... HILLARY!
... OBAMA!
AND:
HEH-HEH! WELL, IT'S AN EXCITING RACE ...
YEAH, VOTERS ARE ENERGIZED ...
EITHER WAY, IT'S HISTORIC ...
THIS NEXT PRIMARY SHOULD DECIDE IT ...
Hillary
Obama
NOW:
YOUR NAIVE, ALL-TALK-AND-NO-EXPERIENCE CANDIDATE WOULD BE SWIFT BOAT FODDER!
YOUR POLARIZING, THINKS-SHE'S-ENTITLED-TO-WIN CANDIDATE IS THE GOP'S DREAM COME TRUE!
BEAT OBAMA
STOP HILLARY
IT AIN'T OVER 'TIL IT'S OVER!
SEE YOU AT THE CONVENTION!!

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Mom didn't think she needed email… now she can't live without it.

The HP Printing Mailbox with Presto Service lets her receive email and full-color photos without a computer or Internet connection.

The Perfect Solution for Parents & Grandparents

If you're like me, you'd love to get Mom into the electronic family loop. My mom doesn't want to use a computer, so until now I haven't been able to send her email. Recently, a friend told me about a great solution she found. It's called the HP Printing Mailbox with Presto Service, and it lets her send email, photos, and PDF documents to her parents even though they don't have a computer.

Stay Connected to Family

My grown kids and I rely on email to stay in touch. Keeping in touch with my Mom is different. She doesn't have or want a computer, and while I always had good intentions of printing photos and sending

letters, I just didn't have the time. Sure, I call a lot, but she was missing out on all of the great family emails and photos that I get from my kids.

Simple Technology Makes Staying in Touch Easy

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Alexander Cockburn

Maybe One Cheer for Barack Obama

Suddenly everyone is having a "conversation." The word has come of age. I see it bowing and scraping on the opinion pages and TV talk shows three or four times a day. Its formulaic sidekick is the equally irksome "if you will," beloved of Wolf Blitzer, John King and other TV correspondents. "If you will" is something between a sheeplike cough and a verbal tail-wag, a signifier of decorum, itself a prime ingredient of the "national conversation."

"National conversations" are clubby affairs. Their prime purpose is to exclude the unconversational, meaning intellectual or verbal excess—above all, unseemly questioning of the essential functionality of the existing system. Indeed, I began to keep an eye out for the term a few years ago, when I read a column in which some rabble-rouser was haughtily blackballed as most definitely not being part of the national conversation.

It's possible that the "national conversation" got its start as an effort to dignify the interactions of the "chattering classes," a phrase that had its origin as a right-wing snarl in the Thatcher years. Real men and real women didn't chatter. They moved briskly forward with the business of "governance," yet another irksome locution.

Barack Obama's speech in Philadelphia about race stuck pretty carefully to the unwritten rules of a national conversation, in marked contrast to the sermons of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose stimulating rhetoric has caused such an extraordinary affront—if you will—to the conversing classes.

The junior senator from Illinois is a master at drowning the floundering swimmer he purports to rescue while earning credit for extending a manly hand in solidarity. I noticed this the first time I wrote about Obama, back in the spring of 2006, when Ned Lamont was trying to make the disgusting political conduct of Senator Joseph Lieberman part of the national conversation, at least among Democrats. Obama hastened to a big political dinner in Connecticut to cut the conversation off and denounce any deviations from support of his mentor Lieberman.

Obama repeated his fake-rescue technique when Illinois's senior senator, Dick Durbin, got into trouble for likening conditions at Guantánamo to those in a Nazi or Stalin-era camp. This was one of Durbin's finer moments, as he read an FBI man's account of how he had entered an interview room "to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves, and had been left there for 18-24 hours or more."

"If I read this to you," Durbin told his fellow senators, "and did not tell you that it was an FBI agent describing what Americans had done to prisoners in their control, you would most certainly believe this must have been done by Nazis, Soviets in their gulags or some mad regime—Pol Pot or others—that had no concern for human beings. Sadly, that is not the case. This was the action of Americans in the treatment of their prisoners. It is not too late. I hope we will learn from history. I hope we will change course."

The right wing jumped all over Durbin, and he paid the penalty of having to eat crow on the Senate floor. His colleague the junior senator from Illinois duly rose to speak. Now the topic here, remember, was not the candidacy-endangering one of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a man eager to grasp every nettle, tug it up by the roots and lash at the face of Empire with it. This was Senator Dick Durbin, who had quite properly denounced insupportable conduct by US government personnel. Courage should have required Obama to support Durbin.

But Obama is careful, far more than he is courageous. In this instance he lent a supportive hand to his beleaguered colleague Durbin by shoving Durbin's head under the waves with the thrice-repeated use of the word "mistake." "We have a tendency to demonize and jump on and make mockery of each other across the aisle, and that is particularly pronounced when we make mistakes. Each and every one of us is going to make a mistake once in a while…and what we hope is that our track record of service, the scope of how we've operated and interacted with people, will override whatever particular mistake we make."

With Wright, Obama began by excluding him from the national conversation: "The remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam."

A "perceived injustice" isn't really an injustice at all. It's a figment—if you will—of the paranoid black imagination. Israel is stalwart, and the perceived horror—if you will—of its siege of Gaza is not even to be mentioned, as against the perversities of Islam. Then comes anathema, as pronounced by any conversationalist: divisiveness. "Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems."

Our tragedy is that we have three neoliberals left in the presidential race, at a time when neoliberalism has collapsed and life-giving divisiveness is on top of the Wanted list. I suppose, out of the three of them, I prefer Obama. McCain is an idiot and HRC wants Volcker, Rubin and Greenspan to lead a "high-level emergency working group" to recommend ways to restructure at-risk mortgages to help avert more foreclosures. But I don't think Obama is a real fighter. He's too pretty, and he doesn't want to get his looks messed up. ■

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The blowback of housing deflation on our massively overleveraged financial markets has seriously constricted the flow of credit—the lifeblood of the world's largest debtor economy.

by JEFF FAUX

For more than a decade, we Americans have been living on an economic San Andreas fault—a foundation of fracturing competitiveness covered by unsustainable consumer spending with money borrowed from foreigners. A financial earthquake was inevitable. We don't know how high on the recession Richter scale the current crisis will take us, but it increasingly looks like, as they say in San Francisco, "The Big One."

Since the last Big One, the Great Depression of the 1930s, we have had eleven small to medium recessions, lasting an average of ten months. The most severe—two back-to-back downturns that began in 1979—drove price increases and the unemployment rate to double digits.

We're not at those levels yet. But the structural supports underneath our shop-till-we-drop economy are considerably weaker. For starters, we have a historic depression in the housing market. Americans' total mortgage debt now exceeds their home equity, for the first time since 1945. Housing prices have dropped 10 percent since last spring, followed by record foreclosures. Most economists expect them to drop at least another 10 percent, which could leave more than 14 million households—at least 16 percent of the total—better off if they just walked away from their homes. Prices could go even lower.

Until last year, housing prices in most places had risen rapidly since the 1990s. This enabled middle-class homeowners with stagnant wages and maxed-out credit cards to keep spending by refinancing their mortgages. The housing boom also spawned the now infamous subprime mortgage—a scheme devised by Main Street realtors and Wall Street bankers to finance home buying with loans that let the borrower buy in with little money down but carried high interest rates. The expensive payments would be made later by refinancing the mortgage as prices continued to rise. These subprimes were sold to middle-class strivers upgrading to McMansions as well as to the working poor.

The increased demand pushed housing prices further into the stratosphere—until, inevitably, they fell back to earth. When the subprime borrowers could no longer make their payments, foreclosure signs went up, lowering the value of other houses in the neighborhood. The refinancing spigot shut off, retail sales sputtered and by January the economy was shedding jobs.

But it is not the squeeze on homeowners that is giving our central bankers nightmares. It is the blowback of housing deflation on the country's massively overleveraged financial markets, which has seriously constricted the flow of credit—the lifeblood of the world's largest debtor economy.

In a typical deal, subprime mortgages were sold to investment companies, where they were commingled with prime mortgages to back up new securities that could be touted as both safe and high-yielding. This new debt paper was then peddled to investors, who used it as collateral for "margin" loans to buy yet more stocks and bonds. At each change of

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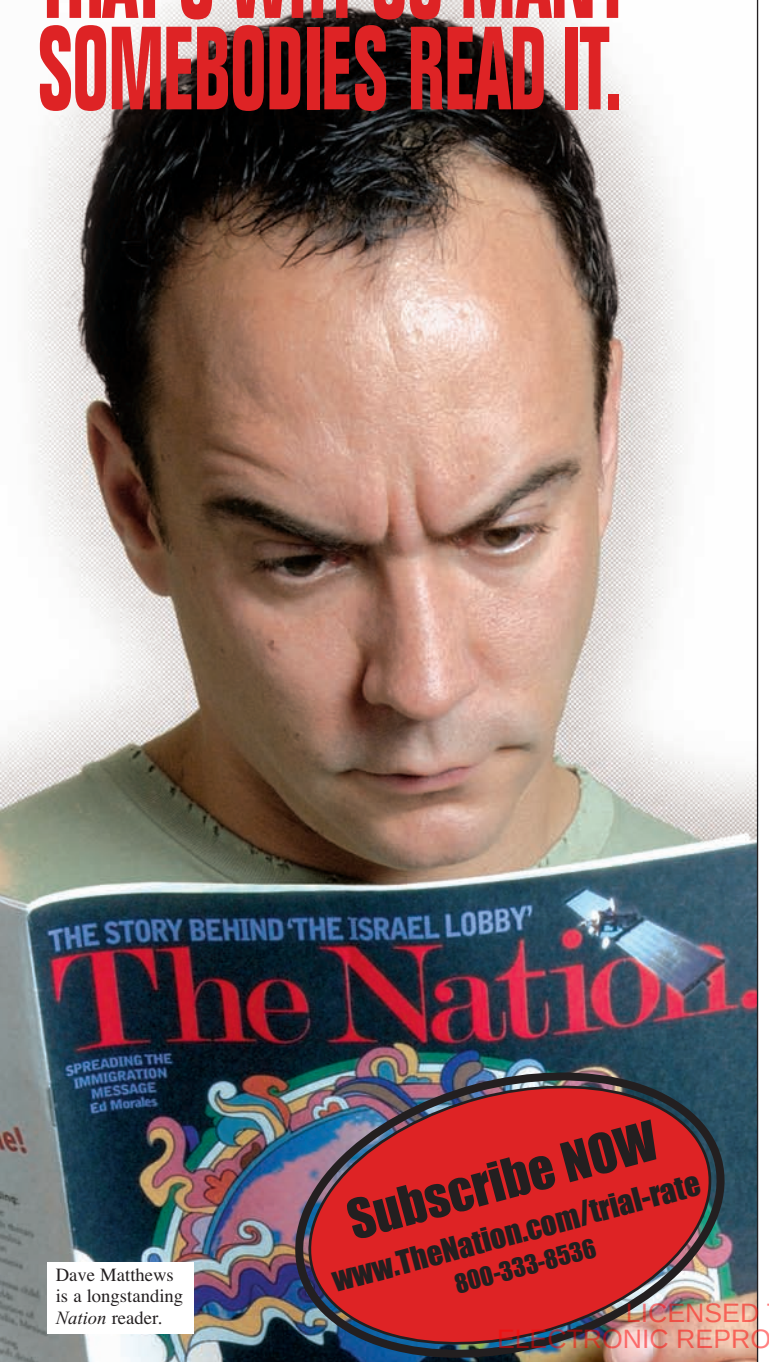

Dave Matthews is a longstanding *Nation* reader.

hands, fees and underwriting charges added to the total claims on the original shaky mortgages. The result was a frenzied bidding up of prices for a bewildering maze of arcane securities that neither buyers nor sellers could accurately value.

Giant Ponzi scheme? Not to worry, responded the Wall Street geniuses. By spreading risks among more people, the miracle of "diversity" was actually turning bad loans into good ones. Anyway, banks were buying insurance policies against default, which in turn were transformed into a set of even murkier securities called "credit default swaps" and marketed to hedge funds, pension managers and in some cases back to the banks that were being insured in the first place. At the end of 2007 the market for these swaps was estimated at $45.5 trillion—roughly twice as large as all US stock markets combined.

This huge pyramid of debt was made possible by thirty years of relentless deregulation of financial markets, culminating in the 1999 repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, which had prohibited banks from dealing in high-risk securities. In effect, Washington regulators became passive enablers to Wall Street's financial binge drinkers. When they crashed—for example, in the savings-and-loan and junk-bond debacles of the 1980s, the Long-Term Capital Management collapse of 1998 and the Enron and dot-com crashes of the early 2000s—the government cleaned up the mess with taxpayers' money and let them go back to the bar.

So here we go again. When subprime homeowners stopped paying, the prices of the mortgage-backed securities used as collateral fell. Banks demanded that their borrowers pay up or cover their margins. Panicked selling by borrowers further lowered the securities' prices, triggering more margin calls and more defaults. Massive losses piled up at places like Citigroup, Countrywide, Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley, and cascaded back into the insurance companies. At the end of February, the huge insurer American International Group reported the largest quarterly loss, $5 billion, since the company started in 1919.

After some delay, the Federal Reserve Board last summer started lowering interest rates on loans to the banks. But in a phrase from the bank crisis of the 1930s, it was like "pushing on a string." The bankers' problem was not that money was too expensive to lend out; it was that they were afraid they wouldn't get their money back. When they did lend, they jacked up the rates to compensate for the higher perceived risks—even to solid customers. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey suddenly had to borrow money at 20 percent. The State of Pennsylvania couldn't finance its college student loan program. Fannie Mae, the fund created by the federal government to support perfectly sound middle-class housing, struggled to sell its bonds.

In mid-March, after anguished discussions between Federal Reserve officials and Wall Street moguls, the Fed agreed to provide $400 billion in new cash loans to banks and investment firms. Days later came the shock of eighty-five-year-old Bear Stearns going belly up. In an unprecedented deal, the Fed immediately lent JPMorgan Chase the money to buy Bear Stearns, taking suspect mortgage-backed paper as collateral. Bear's stock-

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holders had already taken a hosing when the stock crashed. The big winners were the company's creditors and insurers, who were saved from the consequences of their bad business judgment.

We are now staring into the abyss. The Bear Stearns bailout has created a presumption of a safety net under any major stockbroker, in addition to any major bank. Rumors are that Lehman Brothers and Citigroup may be next. The Fed could handle a Lehman crash. But the collapse of Citigroup, the world's largest bank, would be catastrophic, bankrupting businesses, other banks and consumers and cutting off credit for state and local governments. And it could stretch the Fed to the limit of its resources.

There is a widespread assumption that there is no bottom to the pockets of the Federal Reserve. Not quite. The Fed has a finite amount of actual assets—mostly Treasury obligations backed by the "full faith and credit" of the government, which is a commitment to raise taxes if necessary to pay the debt. These assets total about $800 billion, some $400 billion of which have been obligated to back up loans. If the loans default, the Fed has to sell the Treasury notes in order to settle. If there are enough of these failures, the Fed could exhaust its assets. It would then have to resort to really "printing money"—issuing promissory notes not backed up by anything—or get bailed out by the Treasury, putting taxpayers further in the hole. Long before the Fed is down to the last of its stash of Treasury notes, more skittish domestic and foreign investors will flee the dollar. Interest rates would balloon and prices of oil and other imports would skyrocket. Credit would freeze, investment would plummet and tens of millions of Americans would be out on the street, with neither a job nor a roof over their heads.

We are now staring into the abyss. America seems headed for major economic damage that will severely test our remaining safety nets.

Unlikely? Yes, still. Unthinkable? Not anymore. Estimates of Wall Street's losses already run well up to $500 billion. A 20 percent drop in housing prices would translate into a $4 trillion drop in the value of housing assets. A large chunk of that loss would destroy the value that underlies the mortgage-backed securities the Fed has now agreed to guarantee.

But well short of such a worst-case scenario, the country seems headed for major economic damage that will severely test whatever we have left of safety nets. It took five years from the time the recovery began in 1983 for the unemployment rate to return to pre-recession levels. Once we reach the bottom of this trough, it could be a very long time before American consumers, whose spending accounts for some 70 percent of our economy, crawl out of the debt hole and back into the shopping mall. The Japanese have still not recovered from their similar housing/debt crash in the early 1990s.

Virtually everyone who has studied Japan in the 1990s and the United States in the 1930s concludes that in both cases the government acted too late with too little in order to stop the debt dominoes from tumbling through the entire economy.

But the American political system seems as seized up as the credit markets. As the Federal Reserve tries desperately to put an overdosed Wall Street on life support, President Bush remains dizzily detached, periodically repeating his moronic mantra against government intervention in the free market. At a press conference that is impossible to parody, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson announced the Administration "plan" to safeguard the nation against a future crisis. It boiled down to a hope that the finance industry would do a better job of policing itself and that individual states would see to any new laws that might be needed. In what the *New York Times* dryly reported were his "most extensive comments to date about the credit and market problems," Paulson, formerly co-chair of the investment firm Goldman Sachs, firmly told reporters that he was not interested in finding "scapegoats." No kidding.

In response to pressure from Democrats, the White House at the end of January did reluctantly agree to a fiscal stimulus. But Bush demanded that it be limited to the only economic policy he understands: tax cuts. Democrats caved, and the government started printing up $160 billion in a one-time rebate to consumers and businesses, which will be sent out in May. Too little, too late, and likely to be spent paying down debt and buying more Chinese imports.

Senate majority leader Harry Reid has proposed a second round of stimulus—this time through public investment, putting people to work rebuilding bridges, schools and other infrastructure. But no one is talking about a level of fiscal injection needed to counterbalance the drop in consumer and business spending.

If we use the 1979–83 experience as a guide, we'd need some $600 billion to $700 billion in deficit spending. But in those days, the United States was still a creditor nation. Thanks to three decades of trade deficits, topped by the costs of the Iraq War, we now depend on foreign lenders, increasingly worried about the value of their US bonds. As Lee Price, chief economist of the House Appropriations Committee, put it, "We need as big a stimulus as our foreign lenders will allow us to get away with."

To give some relief to those at the bottom of this tottering financial edifice, Barney Frank and Chris Dodd, chairs of, respectively, the House Financial Services and Senate Banking committees, are proposing updated versions of a Depression-era housing rescue program. The government would furnish $300–$400 billion to buy up existing home mortgages at prices marked down to reflect the current lower values. The plan could refinance 1–2 million homes. It may not be enough, but it probably represents the outer limit of what is possible in the twilight year of a White House whose economic competence is in the twilight zone.

Given the way Washington works, the Frank/Dodd proposal would need business support. Yet despite the fact that it would bring desperately needed trust back to the system, the capos of the Wall Street mob are unenthusiastic. Being forced to acknowledge losses on their books could toss a few more of them out of their jobs at a time when the supply of golden parachutes may be getting thin. Better to hunker down and whimper for more welfare from the Fed.

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Some are already getting direct bailouts from big government. But it's not coming from the US government. Foreign-government-owned "sovereign wealth funds" are now buying sizable equity shares to shore up battered firms. Citigroup, where the Saudis are already the chief stockholder, sold roughly $20 billion of itself to Abu Dhabi, Singapore and Kuwait. The Chinese just bought 10 percent of Morgan Stanley, and Merrill Lynch sold a 9 percent stake to Singapore. With oil above $100 a barrel, more of Wall Street is certain to wind up owned in the Middle East. Some members of Congress still warn that these countries are looking for political influence in America's financial heart, rather than optimizing their rate of return. They are probably right, but the nationalist fires that flared up against Dubai ownership of US ports in 2006 have largely been banked. Beggars can't be choosers.

Another hope is that the Europeans, the Chinese, whoever, will take over our role as the world's consumer of last resort. As the recession slows US imports, countries that have grown fat on exports to us will certainly have to shift more of their growth to their own domestic market. But to expect that the leaders of other nations would put their own economies at risk by running up trade deficits in order to save us Americans from the consequences of our own folly seems stunningly naïve.

So if this is not The Big One, it is likely to be A Big One—and a long one.

We could still get lucky, of course. Republicans facing reelection might persuade Bush to support a big fiscal stimulus and housing rescue. Home prices may miraculously stabilize. Tomorrow, bankers may wake up like Scrooge on Christmas morning and just start lending. The Chinese may start importing American-made cars…

Otto von Bismarck once remarked, "There is a Providence that protects idiots, drunkards, children and the United States of America." Let's hope it's still true. ■

Who Are They Calling Elitist?

Conservative canard #17: liberals are snobs.

by ERIC ALTERMAN

PETER O. ZIERLEIN

The contemporary conservative obsession with the "liberal elite" has its origin in the campaign of 1964, when Ronald Reagan crisscrossed the country in support of Barry Goldwater's presidential aspirations, accusing liberals of believing that "an intellectual elite in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves." Richard Nixon took up the cudgel in his second State of the Union speech, complaining that "a bureaucratic elite in Washington knows best what is best for people everywhere." But it was Nixon's Vice President, Spiro Agnew, who, aided by speechwriters Pat Buchanan and William Safire, showed right-wingers what political potential lay in this line of attack, with his orgies of alliteration regarding the evildoings of various "pusillanimous pussyfooters," "hopeless hysterical hypochondriacs of history," "nattering nabobs of negativism" and "effete corps of impudent snobs," to pick just a few of his favorite epithets for liberal opponents in the media and academia.

Since then, no right-wing campaign has been complete without some form of repudiation of what former Vice President Dan Quayle named the liberal "cultural elite," whose avowed purpose is to undermine all that is admirable and virtuous in Middle America, or as Quayle termed it, "the rest of us." (Asked to define the evildoers, Quayle responded, "They know who they are.") Quayle's addition of the word "cultural" to "elite," coupled with his attack on a popular television character, single mom/anchorwoman Murphy Brown, was a stroke of genuine genius, as it allowed conservatives to continue to feel themselves oppressed even as they gained control of virtually all of the levers of political power in the United States and much of the news media. Liberals' power, conservatives continue to insist, trumps political power because we allegedly control the "culture." Today it is all but impossible to hear the word "liberal" without the word "elite" attached.

It's hard to know exactly what conservatives mean by the accusation of elitism, as it appears to fit almost any occasion. If you examine the definitions offered by elitism's accusers, the crime is apparently one of mind, akin to such offenses as "bourgeois sentimentality" or "rootless cosmopolitanism" in

Eric Alterman is Distinguished Professor of Journalism at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and Media Matters for America, a Nation *columnist and a fellow at The Nation Institute. This March marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of his first article for this magazine. This article is adapted from his new book,* Why We're Liberals: A Political Handbook for Post-Bush America *(Viking).*

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Are you missing the luxury of warm, relaxing baths? Well, grab your towel!

NEW

By John Fleming

For many of us, nothing is more relaxing than a long, luxurious bath. Unfortunately, because of safety concerns, many people, particularly older people, have to forego this simple pleasure. Sure, you can spend big bucks to remodel your bathroom to provide a bathtub you can use, but who wants to do that? Now there's a better way, and it lets you use the bath that's in your home today.

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the Stalinist Soviet Union. Rush Limbaugh posited his success as an example of what he termed "middle America's growing rejection of the elites," which he defines as "professionals" and "experts," including "the medical elites, the sociological elites, the education elites, the legal elites, the science elites…and the ideas this bunch promotes through the media." Conservative pundit Peggy Noonan identifies "America's elite" as "the politicians, wise men, think-tank experts, academics, magazine and editorial-page editors, big-city columnists, TV commentators" who had the temerity to oppose Bush's ruinous war in Iraq. The qualities of the "big and real America," from which George W. Bush (of Harvard, Yale and Andover) hails, are those that liberal elites would recognize as native to "another America, and boy has it endured. It just won a war. [Noonan was writing in early 2003, before the catastrophe that Iraq has become was apparent to all.] Its newest generation is rising, and its members are impressive. They came from a bigger America and a realer one—a healthy and vibrant place full of religious feeling and cultural energy and Bible study and garage bands and sports-love and mom-love and sophistication and normality."

A telling aspect of the conservatives' attack on liberal elitism is their intense attachment to the same elite institutions they profess to detest.

Conservatives did not, of course, wish to do away with "elites." They merely wanted to replace them with their own. As John Judis pointed out in his book-length study *The Paradox of American Democracy*, "Instead of creating a new elite, they undermined what it meant for a country to have one. The new groups, in contrast to the old, did not seek to be above class, party and ideology. On the contrary, they were openly probusiness and conservative.… They did not seek to mediate conflicts but to take one side. They had no ties to labor unions or to the environmental, consumer or civil rights movements that had emerged in the sixties, but only to the business counteroffensive against them.… They did not seek to produce objective results by means of social science. On the contrary, they were willing to use social science to achieve partisan results."

In observing the members of the conservative elite denouncing "elitists," it can be difficult to tell your players without the proverbial scorecard. For instance, radio talk-show host and former conservative cable host Laura Ingraham has written an entire book about the dangers posed by liberal elites, *Shut Up and Sing: How Elites From Hollywood, Politics, and the Media Are Subverting America*. In it, this daughter of a Connecticut lawyer, a graduate of Dartmouth and the University of Virginia Law School who now lives in an expensive home in Washington, DC, distinguishes between liberal elitists and those she terms "true Americans." She begins her treatise by explaining who these "elite Americans" are and what they think: "They think we're stupid. They think our patriotism is stupid. They think our churchgoing is stupid. They think our flag-flying is stupid. They think having big families is stupid. They think where we live—anywhere but near or in a few major cities—is stupid. They think our SUVs are stupid. They think owning a gun is stupid. They think our abiding belief in the goodness of America and its founding principles is stupid."

Ingraham is joined in her crusade by another ex-MSNBC pundette, the second-generation Connecticut lawyer and Cornell University alumna Ann Coulter, who rhapsodizes about red-state denizens, as Geoffrey Nunberg notes in his book *Talking Right*, "with the effusiveness of a fifth-grader reporting on a zoo visit": "I loved Kansas City! It's like my favorite place in the world.… It's the opposite of this town. They're Americans, they're so great, they're rooting for America!" "I love Texas Republicans!… Americans are so cool!" "Queens, baseball games—those are my people. American people." Like Ingraham, Coulter distinguishes between "us" and "them" on the basis of attitude rather than income, though the multimillionaire does allow that "the whole point of being a liberal [is] to feel superior to people with less money."

John Podhoretz, the son of neoconservatism's second couple, Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter, who attended elite private schools and the University of Chicago before his father's connections helped him secure jobs in the media empires of Sun Myung Moon and Rupert Murdoch, also professes to see America through rose-hued glasses. "Bush Red is a simpler place," he explains, on the basis of a visit to Las Vegas. It's a land "where people mourn the death of NASCAR champion Dale Earnhardt, root lustily for their teams, go to church, and find comfort in old-fashioned verities." His comrade in anti-intellectual arms, former CBS News reporter Bernard Goldberg, who has spent a career working within what conservatives would call the "liberal media elite" and who wrote a book comparing his former friend Dan Rather to a "prison bitch," has sworn off all association with liberals even when he agrees with them, he says, "because of their elitism. They look down their snobby noses at ordinary Americans who eat at Red Lobster or because they like to bowl or they go to church on a regular basis or because they fly the flag on the Fourth of July."

In red-state America, explains the slumming blue stater David Brooks, "the self is small"; whereas in blue-state America, "the self is more commonly large." Unlike the citizens of the states that voted for Al Gore, according to Andrew Sullivan, they can even be trusted not to betray their country on behalf of Islamic terrorists. Yet while unelite America is wonderful in every way, it's just not a place where Laura Ingraham or Rush Limbaugh or Bernard Goldberg or Ann Coulter or John Podhoretz or Newt Gingrich or Peggy Noonan or Andrew Sullivan or David Brooks would ever choose to live.

A telling aspect of the conservatives' attack on liberal elitism is their intense attachment to the very same elite liberal academic institutions they profess to detest. When George Bush tried to nominate his personal lawyer, Harriet Miers, a graduate of Southern Methodist University Law School, to the Supreme Court, conservatives had a collective conniption fit over her meager credentials. *National Review*'s Ramesh Ponnuru called her "an inspiring testament to the diversity of the president's cronies." Former Bush speechwriter David Frum complained that for his old boss "to take a hazard on anything other than a known quantity of the highest intellectual and personal excellence" was "simply reckless." It was "an unserious nomination,"

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whined John Podhoretz. "I'm beginning to think that this appointment was an expression of the president's contempt for the conservative intelligentsia," Andrew Sullivan complained. To top it all off, Robert Bork, the Yale man whose extremist views kept him off the Court in 1987, called the nomination "a slap in the face to the conservatives who've been building a conservative legal movement for twenty years."

No complaint was heard from these same fire breathers, however, when Bush caved in to their demands and dumped Miers for Princeton and Yale Law alum Samuel Alito. (This was the same President, you'll recall, who chose John Roberts of Harvard College and Harvard Law School to be Chief Justice of the United States and later nominated Ben Bernanke, a Princeton economist, to be chairman of the Federal Reserve.) Other commentators have noticed that in the anti-elitist Bush Administration, the plum positions are dominated by graduates of Swarthmore, Stanford, Harvard, Yale and Andover. One can see exactly the same dynamic at work on Bush's national security team. When Bush finally admitted the catastrophic direction his war plans had taken in Iraq, he kept Condoleezza Rice (provost, Stanford University), fired Donald Rumsfeld (BA, Princeton) and put Robert Gates (PhD, Georgetown University) in his place, and named Gen. David Petraeus (PhD, Princeton) head of US forces there. Petraeus was joined by Col. Michael Meese (ditto) and what Carter Malkasian, who has advised Marine Corps commanders in Iraq on counterinsurgency and who holds an Oxford doctorate (with a degree in the history of war), noted was the most "highly educated" set of advisers a US commander had ever assembled—at least in Malkasian's recollection. According to conservative anti-elitist prejudices, such educational contamination should disqualify a man from service, rather than recommend him.

Given the transparent hypocrisy of the "liberal elitist" charge, coupled with its shifting but always not quite definable content, one cannot help but be awed by the effectiveness with which it is wielded. The simplest explanation is that "elitism" has come to be perceived as a legitimate attack word by the right, without anyone really being able to define why. Remember: it's not about where you live, how much money you have, how many security guards you regularly employ, where you summer, what you drive, what you drive when you're driving whatever else you drive when you're not driving that, where you went to school or where you think people should have gone to school. Conservatives are as one with the people they so disdain on all of those scores. Rather, "elitism" has simply become a contentless cudgel with which to beat back one's opponents without the trouble of engaging their arguments. Nunberg notes that right-wingers have had remarkable success in pigeonholing liberalism as a "white upper-middle-class affectation."

"Just look, for example, at the way liberals are referred to in the media, even in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*," says Nunberg. "Wherever you look, the liberal label is almost exclusively reserved for middle-class whites. Phrases like 'working-class liberals,' 'Hispanic liberals' and 'black liberals' are virtually nonexistent, though 'conservative' is frequently used to describe members of all those groups. When the media are referring to members of the working class or minority groups who vote left-of-center, they invariably describe them

The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing.

- John Muir

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as Democrats, with the implication that their political choices are shaped by economic self-interest or traditional party loyalty rather than by any deep commitment to liberal ideals. It's as if you can't count as a liberal unless you can afford the lifestyle. Liberalism is treated less as a political credo than as the outward expression of a particular social identity, like a predilection for granite countertops and bottled water."

It's quite a trick these right-wingers have pulled off, one that might even impress George Orwell. When they dislike a position, they deride it as "elitist," irrespective of the fact that it is supported by a majority of Americans. Personally, they enjoy exactly the same advantages as liberal elitists, but they insist that this does not matter, because they think about those advantages differently. When asked to define just what is so awful about the way liberals think, they fall back on a series of unproven—and ultimately unprovable—accusations of the kind made by totalitarian regimes against their dissidents. Somehow they've managed to persuade the so-called liberal media to repeat these same accusations, despite the rather inconvenient fact that they make no sense. In the meantime, they've managed to discredit virtually all of the people to whom they can successfully attach their wholly meaningless tag. It may not make much sense, but as the folks at American Express have taught us, success is its own reward. ■

Water Warriors

Declaring water a right, not a commodity, a global water justice movement is growing.

by MAUDE BARLOW

Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.
—W.H. Auden, *First Things First*

A fierce resistance to the corporate takeover of water has grown in every corner of the globe, giving rise to a coordinated and, given the powers it is up against, surprisingly successful water justice movement. "Water for all" is the rallying cry of local groups fighting for access to clean water and the life, health and dignity that it brings. Many of these groups have lived through years of abuse, poverty and hunger. Many have been left without public education and health programs when their governments were forced to abandon them under World Bank structural adjustment policies. But somehow, the assault on water has been the great standpoint for millions. Without water there is no life, and for thousands of communities around the world, the struggle over the right to their own local water sources has been politically galvanizing.

A mighty contest has grown between those (usually powerful) forces and institutions that see water as a commodity, to be put on the open market and sold to the highest bidder, and those who see water as a public trust, a common heritage of people and nature, and a fundamental human right. The origins of this movement, generally referred to as the global water justice movement, lie in the hundreds of communities around the world where people are fighting to protect their local water supplies from pollution, destruction by dams and theft—be it from other countries, their own governments or private corporations such as bottled water companies and private utilities backed by the World Bank. Until the late 1990s, however, most were operating in isolation, unaware of other struggles or the global nature of the water crisis.

Maude Barlow is the author of Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water *(New Press), from which this article was adapted. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.* *Copyright © 2007 by Maude Barlow.*

PETER O. ZIERLEIN

Latin America was the site of the first experiments with water privatization in the developing world. The failure of these projects has been a major factor in the rejection of the neoliberal market model by so many Latin American countries that have said no to the extension of the North American Free Trade Agreement to the Southern Hemisphere and that have forced the big water companies to retreat. A number of Latin American countries are also opting out of some of the most egregious global institutions. This past May Bolivia, Venezuela and Nicaragua announced their decision to withdraw from the World Bank's arbitration court, the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), in no small measure because of the way the big water corporations have used the center to sue for compensation when the countries terminated private delivery contracts.

Latin America, with its water abundance, should have one of the highest per capita allocations of water in the world. Instead, it has one of the lowest. There are three reasons, all connected: polluted surface waters, deep class inequities and water privatization. In many parts of Latin America, only the rich can buy clean water. So it is not surprising that some of the most intense fights against corporate control of water

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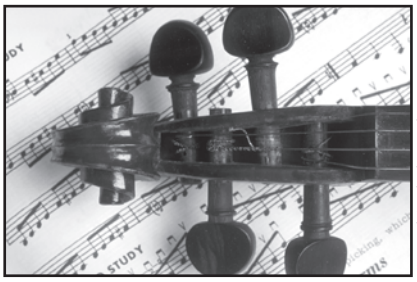

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Professor Robert Greenberg holds degrees from Princeton University and the University of California, Berkeley, where he received a Ph.D. in Music Composition. He has composed more than 45 works and has lectured for many prestigious musical and arts organizations. He is music historian-in-residence with San Francisco Performances, the city's premier presenter of chamber music, instrumental and vocal recitals, jazz, and contemporary dance.

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have come out of this region of the world.

The first "water war" gained international attention when the indigenous peoples of Cochabamba, Bolivia, led by a five-foot, slightly built, unassuming shoemaker named Oscar Olivera, rose up against the privatization of their water services. In 1999, under World Bank supervision, the Bolivian government had passed a law privatizing Cochabamba's water system and gave the contract to US engineering giant Bechtel, which immediately tripled the price of water. In a country where the minimum wage is less than $60 a month, many users received water bills of $20 a month, which they simply could not afford. As a result, La Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida (Coalition in Defense of Water and Life), one of the first coalitions against water privatization in the world, was formed and organized a successful referendum demanding the government cancel its contract with Bechtel. When the government refused to listen, many thousands took to the streets in nonviolent protest and were met with army violence that wounded dozens and killed a 17-year-old boy. On April 10, 2000, the Bolivian government relented and told Bechtel to leave the country.

The Bolivian government had also bowed to pressure from the World Bank to privatize the water of La Paz and in 1997 gave Suez, a French-based multinational, a thirty-year contract to supply water services to it and El Alto, the hilly region surrounding the capital, where thousands of indigenous peoples live. From the beginning, there were problems. Aguas del Illimani, a Suez subsidiary, broke three key promises: it did not deliver to all the residents, poor as well as rich, leaving about 200,000 without water; it charged exorbitant rates for water hookups, about $450, equivalent to the food budget of a poor family for two years; and it did not invest in infrastructure repair or wastewater treatment, choosing instead to build a series of ditches and canals through poor areas of La Paz, which it used to send garbage, raw sewage and even the effluent from the city's abattoirs into Lake Titicaca, considered by UNESCO a World Heritage site. To add insult to injury, the company located its fortresslike plant under the beautiful Mount Illimani, where it captured the snowmelt off the mountain and, after rudimentary treatment, piped it into the homes of families and businesses in La Paz that could pay. The nearest community, Solidaridad, a slum of about 100 families with no electricity, heat or running water, had its only water supply cut off. Its school and health clinic, built with foreign-aid money, could not operate because of a lack of water. It was the same all through El Alto.

An intense resistance to Suez formed. FEJUVE, a network of local community councils and activists, led a series of strikes in January 2005, which crippled the cities and brought business to a halt. This resistance was a prime factor in the ousting of presidents Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and Carlos Mesa. Their replacement, Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the country's history, negotiated Suez's departure. On January 3, 2007, he held a ceremony at the presidential palace celebrating the return of the water of La Paz and El Alto after a long and bitter confrontation. "Water cannot be turned over to private business," said Morales. "It must remain a basic service, with participation of the state, so that water service can be provided almost for free."

Although they have received less international attention, similar battles over privatized water have raged in Argentina. Río de la Plata (Silver River) separates Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital, from Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. For 500 years, it has also been called Mar Dulce (Sweet Sea) because its size made people think it was a freshwater sea. Today, however, the river is famous for something else: it is one of the few rivers in the world whose pollution can be seen from space. On March 21, 2006, the Argentine government rescinded the thirty-year contract of Aguas Argentinas, the Suez subsidiary that had run the Buenos Aires water system since 1993, in no small part because the company broke its promise to treat wastewater, continuing to dump nearly 90 percent of the city's sewage into the river. In another broken promise, the company repeatedly raised tariffs, for a total increase of 88 percent in the first ten years of operation. Water quality was another issue; water in seven districts had nitrate levels so high it was unfit for human consumption. An April 2007 report by the city's ombudsman stated that most of the population of 150,000 in the southern district of the city lived with open-air sewers and contaminated drinking water.

Yet as Food and Water Watch reports, the Inter-American Development Bank continued to fund Suez as late as 1999, despite the mounting evidence that the company was pulling in 20 percent profit margins while refusing to invest in services or infrastructure. Outrageously, with the backing of the French government, Suez is trying to recoup $1.7 billion in "investments" and up to $33 million in unpaid water bills at the ICSID. Suez had just (in December 2005) been forced out of the province of Santa Fe, where it had a thirty-year contract to run the water systems of thirteen cities. The company is also suing the

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provincial government at the ICSID for $180 million. Close on the heels of the Buenos Aires announcement, Suez was forced to abandon its last stronghold in Argentina, the city of Córdoba, when water rates were raised 500 percent on one bill.

In all cases, strong civil society resistance was key to these retreats. A coalition of water users and residents of Santa Fe, led by Alberto Múñoz and others, actually organized a huge and successful plebiscite, in which 256,000 people, about a twelfth of the population of the province, voted to rescind Suez's contract. They convened a Provincial Assembly on the Right to Water with 7,000 activists and citizens in November 2002, which set the stage for the political opposition to the company. The People's Commission for the Recovery of Water in Córdoba is a highly organized network of trade unions, neighborhood centers, social organizations and politicians with a clear goal of public water for all, and was instrumental in getting the government to break its contract with Suez. "What we want is a public company managed by workers, consumers and the provincial government, and monitored by university experts to guarantee water quality and prevent corruption," says Luis Bazán, the group's leader and a water worker who refused employment with Suez.

Mexico is a beachhead for privatization across the region, with its elites having access to all the water they need and also controlling governments at most levels of the country. Only 9 percent of the country's surface water is fit for drinking, and its aquifers are being drawn down mercilessly. According to the National Commission on Water, 12 million Mexicans have no access to potable water whatsoever and another 25 million live in villages and cities where the taps run as little as a few hours a week. Eighty-two percent of wastewater goes untreated. Mexico City has dried up, and its 22 million inhabitants live on the verge of crisis. Services are so poor in the slums and outskirts of the city that cockroaches run out when the tap is turned on. In many "colonias" in Mexico City and around the country, the only available water is sold from trucks that bring it in once a week, often by political parties that sell the water for votes.

In 1983 the federal government handed over responsibility for the water supply to the municipalities. Then in 1992 it passed a new national water bill that encouraged the municipalities to privatize water in order to receive funding. Privatization was supported by former President Vicente Fox, himself a former senior executive with Coca-Cola, and is also favored by the current president, Felipe Calderón. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank are actively promoting water privatization in Mexico. In 2002 the World Bank provided $250 million for infrastructure repair with conditions that municipalities negotiate public-private partnerships. Suez is deeply entrenched in Mexico, running the water services for part of Mexico City, Cancún and about a dozen other cities. Its wastewater division, Degremont, has a large contract for San Luis Potosí and several other cities as well. The privatization of water has become a top priority for the Mexican water commission, Conagua. As in other countries, privatization in Mexico has brought exorbitant water rates, broken promises and cutoffs to those who cannot pay. The Water Users Association in Saltillo, where a consortium of Suez and the Spanish company Aguas de Barcelona run the city's water systems, reports that a

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2004 audit by the state comptroller found evidence of contractual and state law violations.

A vibrant civil society movement has recently come together to fight for the right to clean water and resist the trend to corporate control in Mexico. In April 2005 the Mexican Center for Social Analysis, Information and Training (CASIFOP) brought together more than 400 activists, indigenous peoples, small farmers and students to launch a coordinated grassroots resistance to water privatization. The Coalition of Mexican Organizations for the Right to Water (COMDA) is a large collection of environmental, human rights, indigenous and cultural groups devoted not only to activism but also to community-based education on water, its place in Mexico's history and the need for legislation to protect the public's right to access. Their hopes for a government supportive of their perspective were dashed when conservative candidate Calderón won (many say stole) the 2006 presidential election over progressive candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Calderón is working openly with the private water companies to cement private control of the country's water supplies.

Other Latin American cities or countries rejecting water privatization include Bogotá, Colombia (although other Colombian cities, including Cartagena, have adopted private water systems); Paraguay, whose lower house rejected a Senate proposal to privatize water in July 2005; Nicaragua, where a fierce struggle has been waged by civil society groups and where in January 2007 a court ruled against the privatization of the country's wastewater infrastructure; and Brazil, where strong public opinion has held back the forces of water privatization in most cities. Unfortunately, resistance in Peru, where increased rates, corruption and debt plague the system, has not yet reversed water privatization. Likewise, in Chile, resistance to water privatization is very difficult because of the entrenched commitment to market ideology of the ruling elites, although there is hope that the center-left government of Michelle Bachelet will be more open to arguments for public governance of Chile's water supplies.

From thousands of local struggles for the basic right to water—not just throughout Latin America but in Asia-Pacific countries, Africa and the United States and Canada—a highly organized international water justice movement has been forged and is shaping the future of the world's water. This movement has already had a profound effect on global water politics, forcing global institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations to admit the failure of their model, and it has helped formulate water policy inside dozens of countries. The movement has forced open a debate over the control of water and challenged the "Lords of Water" who had set themselves up as the arbiters of this dwindling resource. The growth of a democratic global water justice movement is a critical and positive development that will bring needed accountability, transparency and public oversight to the water crisis as conflicts over water loom on the horizon. ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

The Religion Wars

London

Daniel Lazare's review of my book *Divided by Faith* ["Good Faith," March 17] does it the compliment of recounting many of the fascinating phenomena my book describes: ways in which people of different faiths managed sometimes to live alongside one another peacefully in an era notorious for religious conflict.

In the end, though, he concludes that my book must be "bad history." Why? Lazare is fundamentally hostile to religion, and in his review he takes sides with Richard Dawkins and others who see all religion as, at best, false and dangerous. Elsewhere he has claimed that inevitably "even the gentlest religion winds up being violent and tyrannical." So it is no wonder that he dismisses all the concrete examples I offer of toleration being practiced by people who had not been touched by secularization. It is the latter that Lazare credits for the rise of real toleration. In short, Lazare doesn't like my politics, or what he thinks are my politics, and he concludes that my history must therefore be bad. I don't care if he dislikes my politics; I just hope readers see his own crude, error-filled version of the history of toleration for what it is, an ideological construct.

There is just one point on which I'd like to set the record straight. I do not suggest in my book that some religions are better than others, I do not celebrate pietism and I do not suggest a policy of promoting peacefully inclined religions and repressing others. I do believe that religion is never going to disappear and that if ways cannot be found for people of faith to live together peacefully, toleration may be in short supply. If that belief makes me a "hard-core softie," as Lazare calls me, I accept the label proudly.

Benjamin J. Kaplan

Lazare Replies

New York City

It is Benjamin Kaplan who uses the unfortunate phrase "bona fide religion" in distinguishing between "good faith" sects, which are tolerant of others, and those that are not. This is illogical on any number of grounds, the most important of which is that all faiths are fundamentally intolerant because all believe they represent the one true path. The more fervently they believe this, the more aghast they inevitably wind up being at others' erroneous ways. And the more aghast they are, the more likely they are to respond with violence when someone says something particularly hateful, e.g., that Jesus never rose from the dead, that Muhammad was just another warlord or that Yahweh never promised Abraham control of all territory from the Nile to the Euphrates. If these were minor details, it wouldn't matter. But for the truly faithful, they are of world-shaking importance, which is why disagreement is not something they can pass over lightly.

But, hey, it's not only religion that is intolerant. Science is intolerant of superstition, democracy is intolerant of dictatorship and socialism is intolerant of capitalism. Even tolerance is intolerant, as the Dutch are discovering.

What matters, rather, is not tolerance but truth, a matter that, when it comes to religion, Kaplan wisely avoids.

Daniel Lazare

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Philip Whalen doing calligraphy in his apartment, San Francisco, 1965

One Sun Roaring

by JORDAN DAVIS

In 1969, in the middle of moon fever and protests against the war in Vietnam, a picket line of an entirely different kind gathered outside the headquarters of Harcourt Brace & World on Forty-Seventh Street in Manhattan. Dozens of people were there to complain about the list price of a book of poems: Harcourt was charging $17.50 for *On Bear's Head*, a 406-page collection of poems by one of the original Beat poets, Philip Whalen.

The book's price was outrageous—$102.81 in 2008 dollars, more than twice the price of the title under review—but Whalen's publication by a house that during the '60s had also brought out work by T.S. Eliot and Eudora Welty was not. Whalen had always been associated with bestselling poets. He was one of the three poets who read work before Allen Ginsberg debuted "Howl" at the Six Gallery in San Francisco the night of October 7, 1955; he was mythologized by Jack Kerouac as "Warren Coughlin" in *The Dharma Bums* and as "Ben Fagan" in other novels; he was one of the earliest friends in poetry of Gary Snyder, the anarchist Buddhist nature poet. Until 1969 his own work had circulated much more in the usual manner for poetry than that of his famous contemporaries: broadsides, chapbooks and small-press editions. Between the scarcity and the word-of-mouth publicity, incredibly enough, there came to be loud public demand for a work based entirely on the sensation of coming and going. Here is the entirety of "Early Spring":

> The dog writes on the window
> with his nose

Whalen was born on October 20, 1923, in Portland, Oregon, and grew up in The Dalles, a small town eighty miles east of Portland on the Columbia River. He attended Reed College, where he met and eventually shared a house with poets Snyder and Lew Welch. Snyder recalled first noticing him in a campus production of *Pygmalion*; Whalen played Alfred, Eliza's genial humbug father. Whalen pursued the arts with abandon. (He had to be rescued from academic probation after cutting class for weeks to write a novel, which he then dropped.) Seven years older than Snyder, Whalen was on the GI Bill, having studied and worked through the war for the Army Air Corps as a radio operator and trainer in several states. The three poets shared an interest in Reed specialties: Asian literature, Buddhism and calligraphy.

Many great poets have appeared to develop in isolation from other poets, or at least without competition for posterity: think of Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman. In twentieth-century American letters, however, the isolated ones are outnumbered and outshone by the poets who emerged with rivalrous siblings-in-verse. Poets flourish when their excitements (both manic and deadpan) find others to receive them and answer back with their own finds. The friendship of Wordsworth and Coleridge is the prototype; Eliot and Pound are the superstars.

As with the parallel poet cliques at Harvard (the so-called New York School's John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, and later Frank O'Hara) and Columbia (Ginsberg and Kerouac), the young writers at Reed lived to communicate their literary enthusiasms with one another. Welch and Whalen shared an affinity for Gertrude Stein's indifference to the distinction between sense and nonsense. All three exalted in William Carlos Williams's matter-of-fact ornery love of beauty. Williams returned the favor during a visit to Reed in 1950, reading over their work during a private audience and going so far as to remark on the meeting in his autobiography that they were "Good kids, all of them, doing solid work."

Snyder later provided Whalen with sev-

The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen
Edited by Michael Rothenberg.
Wesleyan. 871 pp. $49.95.

Jordan Davis lives and works in New York City; recently his poems have appeared in New England Review *and* The Nation.

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eral entertaining examples to follow: first as a fire spotter for the US Forest Service, then years later as an expatriate student in a Zen monastery in Kyoto, Japan. If style were really the man, Whalen could just as easily have followed his friend Welch's example and gone into advertising. According to Aram Saroyan's 1979 biography of Welch, *Genesis Angels*, Welch was the copywriter responsible for "Raid kills bugs dead," a memorable phrase that would fit happily in either poet's *oeuvre*. In practice, Whalen's predisposition to staying out of the 9-to-5 routine was much more adaptable to his interest in taking up Zen.

Zen became popular as a fundamentalist Buddhist movement in seventh-century China, replacing Pure Land Buddhism's emphasis on sacred texts with the individual's quest to locate and develop in one's self the Buddha-hood thought to exist in all people. Through meditation and study with masters, followers of Zen may reach satori, or sudden enlightenment. The offshoot took lasting root in Japan, where its Chinese name, Ch'an, meaning "quietude" or "meditation," was transformed into the name used now in America as shorthand for baffling directness.

For more than two decades, Whalen lived as a monk in the Soto tradition of Zen Buddhism.

As with many religions, the history of Zen is marked by binary divisions. One tendency of Zen is Rinzai, which is responsible for the development, over several hundred years, of the koan exercise. (The word "koan" means "public document.") The student meditates for months or years on a single paradoxical statement, having frequent interviews with a Zen master to determine progress toward enlightenment. No good trying to rationalize the koan or even to understand it—the whole point of the exercise is to bring the student to a state of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason. When the student is finally ready, the teacher makes a sudden oblique gesture—sometimes a violent one, kicking or hitting, though usually the teacher's prompt takes the form of a random remark.

The other tendency is the conservative, or quietist, side, known as Soto Zen. Soto values sitting and meditation for its own sake, in the awareness that one is already enlightened. Shunryu Suzuki writes that Soto monks regard satori as an "excrescence," not the goal of Zen practice but a kind of bonus, goals being precisely the problem. The San Francisco Zen Center, where Whalen lived as a monk for more than twenty years, is in the Soto tradition.

While Whalen would eventually become the abbot of a Soto Zen center in 1991, there are allusions to koans dating back to even his earliest poems. What may be more significant for the connection between his writing and Zen practice, though, is that he constantly makes a conscious issue of what for most writers would remain unconscious material. Here's a characteristic passage from *You Didn't Even Try* (1967), one of the two novels Whalen didn't destroy:

> Helen was talking. Kenneth was thinking about grapefruit. It had been something new and different that people had begun to eat for breakfast, one of his early memories. He remembered that he could not, at that time, pronounce the word correctly, and his parents made fun of him about it, "grate-thruit." It was seven or eight years later that people began to drink tomato juice in the morning; they had hangovers to cure, then, and tomato juice was supposed to do it, especially with Worcestershire or Tabasco sauce added.

In his prose, Whalen follows the stream of his character's associations from shiny surface to surface, illuminating to claustrophobic effect the lengths frustrated characters go to to avoid being present in the moment and making something of their lives. In his poetry, this deeply silly alternation of lines of inquiry and argument falls into place more relaxingly, as polyphony or comic dialogue. The poem he read the night Ginsberg debuted "Howl," "'Plus Ça Change…'" presents the banter of a long-married couple who have metamorphosed into parakeets:

> What are you doing?
>
> I am coldly calculating.
>
> I didn't ask for a characterization.
> Tell me what we're going to do.
>
> That's what I'm coldly calculating.

Whalen comes by his mistrust of the standard domestic setup honestly. His mother died when he was 15, and his father, an alcoholic, left him and his sister in the care of their grandmother. The time spent with his older relations left him indelibly marked with a gift for re-creating what he referred to as "native speech." From "Soufflé":

> 'What ever became of old Whatchcallum,
> Old what's his name,
> Old… you know, the old fellow
> Who had that little ranch out by Mt. Pisgah,
> Out by the Pisgah Home? Had that
> Eight-finger Chinese cook & everything
> tasted like kerosene,
> We went out there once & put up blackberries.'
>
> 'Why, Dell, I don't remember…
> He was a friend of yours.'

Under Snyder's influence, Whalen spent the summers from 1953 to 1955 as a fire spotter in the Cascades. Whalen worked first on Sauk Mountain, then on Sourdough, both of which are on the Skagit River; his base camp was in Marblemount, about 100 miles northeast of Seattle and thirty miles from the Canadian border. Snyder was a born outdoorsman, with experience in farming, carpentry and logging; he told Whalen, the born scholar, that the job paid good money and left plenty of time for reading.

Money. For lack of it, Whalen had forgone prospective careers: as a student of Asian languages at Berkeley, as a medical student/poet; even the ashram in Seattle where he might have pursued his interest in Vedantic study of Hindu texts was beyond his means. Choice forced by limited means was a refrain for Whalen. Another was his defense of spontaneity as the aim and indispensable product of study. Comparing himself with Snyder, he saw his friend as the true intellectual with a firmer grounding in the history of Asian literature; regarding Kerouac's novels, he noted "how carefully they are constructed," in the tradition of Flaubert and Madame de Lafayette; in a preface to a 1978 collection he remarked that "it is very clear to me that…the poems of Frank O'Hara are greater revolutionary documents than the entire literary production of N. Lenin or Chairman Mao." He valued wit and energy, and he was not unaware of the preparation and defense those qualities require.

There was time for reading, but it came after strenuous weeks or months of clearing trails of brush and fallen trees before even getting up to the lookout. During his first two summers on the job, he spent only a couple weeks in mountaintop seclusion. If he spent part of that time writing, he either destroyed the evidence or saved it to collage

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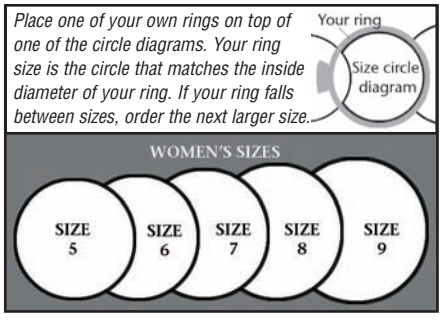

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into later works: there are three poems in *The Collected Poems* dated 1953, and only one from 1954, a meditation on withholding, "Tell Me More":

Not a word
Not for love or money
Not a single word from me, nor
music
(these are not words but signs
they carry no charge)
Make your own speech
You'll get none of mine

His third stint on the mountain, in 1955, lasted nine weeks. Perhaps it was the protracted isolation; perhaps a midnight adventure rescuing a horse that had fallen off a raft into the lake by base camp; maybe, as one biographer insists, it was his experiments throughout the year with peyote; or, as is most likely, the happy chain of events that followed being invited to read his poems that fall at the Six Gallery along with Snyder, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure and Allen Ginsberg. Whatever the cause, after Whalen came down from the mountain, his mature work came with him; he wrote more than 300 short poems in the decade that followed.

Whalen examined the pitfalls of living in an empire less rational than the Greece of Pericles.

"Sourdough Mountain Lookout" is the first of those poems, a collage of Whalen's characteristic interests: wry native speech, direct observation and learned compassion. From the fire spotter's shelter, the speaker tests the boundaries between himself and the four ancient elements (water, light/fire, earth and air), consulting what everyone from Heraclitus to the Buddha has to say about the unity of the self. The scenario is fraught with spookiness and guff. Whalen gingerly protects his (and the reader's) self-respect, opening with a disarming digression: "I always say I won't go back to the mountains/I am too old and fat there are bugs mean mules/And pancakes every morning of the world." As with the great Modernist poems it echoes (Eliot's *Waste Land* is one; Williams's "Della Primavera Trasportata al Morale" is another), "Sourdough" marshals tonal changes, blue asides, found text, flat description. It is, nevertheless, a persistently majestic poem about being "alone in a glass house on a ridge/Encircled by chiming mountains/With one sun roaring through the house all day/& the others crashing through the glass all night." Where even its most radical antecedents gathered their fragments toward some portentous end, this poem points all its artillery at the experience of the present moment. It even ends *in medias res*: "Like they say, 'Four times up,/Three times down.' I'm still on the mountain."

Scenes of Life at the Capital is Whalen's longest sustained effort, and his most substantial. Written in the late 1960s while Whalen was studying Zen in Kyoto, it is a meditation on civilization and barbarism, greatness and idiocy, beauty and just doing what you do. Though the title has the air of alluding to a set form in the visual arts (there are pieces from eighteenth-century Japan with similar names), its form is not as widely imitated as *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, the landscape-scroll form that lends its name to the titles of major works of the mid-'60s by Whalen's friend Snyder and their contemporary Ashbery. It is a pleasantly miscellaneous title, entirely belying the focused bemusement, anger and relief of the poem of exile that follows.

Being a good-natured purveyor of variety turns out to be a problem, too. There is a sameness to the hundreds of shorter poems Whalen wrote mainly in America ("takes," he called them). A speaker addresses an absent reader in tones both plaintive and jocular, taking pleasure in beauty, fretting about day-to-day getting by, observing the inevitability of death and decay, leaving the reader with a cheerful non sequitur and flash of insight. As he self-deprecatingly put it in a poem from 1959,

I've run so far in one circle I'm
visible now
only from the chest upwards
Any poet who's really any good
Dances a complicated maze on top
of the ground
scarcely wearing out the grass

The poems are more entertaining in bulk than most haiku anthologies, and at least as much fun as a Thelonious Monk marathon or a Looney Tunes festival; they nevertheless risk monotony. In *Scenes of Life at the Capital* Whalen sets aside the self-deprecation while gathering up the self. Every paragraph-stanza is surprising and charged with affect, giving the reader a sense of continuity and development that Whalen has until this point eschewed. If the shorter poems are koans, this is his sutra. Far from home, with little of his native language in the air to distract him, he looks squarely at what he perceives to be the desperate flaws of his country, simultaneously considering the options of the individual and society as a whole:

I keep thinking about all the really
great ones
(To paraphrase Mr Spender) I think
Like anybody living in a foreign
country
Of home and money…
There's probably *Some* sensible
human way of living in America
Without being rich or drunk or
taking dope all the time

The Spender line actually runs "I think continually of those who are truly great." What Whalen is continually thinking of is what it's like to live under the weight of the examples of other people's importance: "I keep thinking of those really great ones like Confucius:/'What am I supposed to do, become rich & famous?'" Having taken the example of a so-called great person who emphasized the importance of not worrying about being great, he proceeds to dismantle Spender's line: "I think all the time I can't forgive him/For jamming that 'nk' sound against the initial 'C'/Nor for the blackmail word, 'truly,'" going on to suppose that "somewhere there's an exact & absolutely wild poetical/equivalent." Whalen collects echoes of that idea ("I can't stop thinking about those who really knew/What they were doing"), along with every other idea, every phrase and most of the words he brings into the poem, for the next sixty pages. And along the way, modest scholar that he is, he discovers in Coleridge's "To William Wordsworth" the source of the phrase Spender reworked for his famous line.

In his shorter poems written stateside, Whalen tilts again and again at the problem of citizenship in an empire less rational than the Greece of Pericles, etching satires straight out of Mencken or Bierce. From "Bleakness, Farewell": "If the product is ugly enough, poisonous enough and expensive enough, all Americans will buy it—they will cut down on food, sex, curiosity and even their own fits of paranoia in order to spend more money on the product." These declarations of common sense end abruptly, though, and as for the Beat poet's role as a public figure, Whalen generally limits his commentary on current events to oblique remarks. Here, in its entirety, is "Homage to WBY," written the day after the assassination of JFK: "after you read all them books/all that history and philosophy and things/what do you know that you didn't know before?//Thin sheets of gold with bright enameling." Beautiful perhaps, but also less than satisfyingly complete. From

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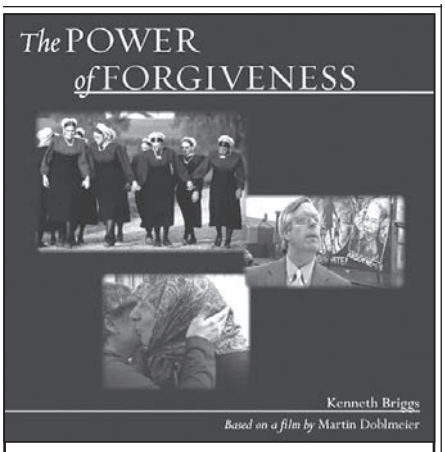
the vantage of Japan, Whalen speaks more freely: "Our main difficulty: fear and distrust of freedom"; "In America we've been fighting each other 100 years/We pretend we're unimaginably rich/But we are poor and afraid of the poor who must become/The Army to defend us against right and wrong"; "The real shame of America is the lack of an anti-clerical/Movement or party. All parties try to compound/With invisible State Protestant Church that theoretically/Doesn't exist. Rubes who think of themselves as/Members in good standing are bilked and robbed"; "When did the dumb-bunny bomb first hit U.S.A.?/How come everybody appreciated it so much?" The individual doesn't get off on the technicality of collective hysteria, either: "Almost all Americans aged 4 to 100/Have the spiritual natures of Chicago policemen."

Whalen's righteousness in *Scenes of Life at the Capital* is absolutely suited to the moment of the composition, the events of Chicago, Berkeley and Kent State all entering into the moving stream. There is no depressive qualifying, and despite his occasional qualm ("One fine day AG [Allen Ginsberg] was mad at me and said,/'You're going to be a little old man who smells of kerosene/and sits in the public library every day reading Pliny'"), no poisonous doubt. As a document of the free spirit, it is the kind of thing that makes conceivable a vision he attributes to "one kid": "I want America to be magic electrical Tibet." And in its aching for redemption, it is irretrievably American: at exactly the halfway point, it shifts gears:

> Western Civilization rigid and tyrannical
> But it also teaches necessity for objective examination
> Of the organization and also provides all kinds of suggestions
> How to alter the works. Mr. Karl Marx wrote a book
> All by his lonesome in the British Museum. (Shhh!)

Suddenly the word "capital" in the poem's title takes on a different aspect. Less than twenty-five years after the end of World War II, at what would turn out to be a little after the middle of the cold war, and more than a decade before the American media would depict the Japanese economy as overtaking America, Whalen advocates reimagining the country along Zen lines. At the very end of the poem, just after recognizing something of himself in the *tanuki*, the Japanese raccoon-dog, he observes that "Japan is a civilization based upon/An inarticulate response to cherry blossoms." His abiding interest in the human race replaces anxiety at the headlong rush toward death of American culture. He concludes with one of his finest celebrations of things-as-they-are: "Old and ruined, all rotted and broken up/These plum trees function gorgeously/A few days every year/In a way nobody else does." In his singular study *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, the scholar R.H. Blyth remarked, "There is only one thing more dismal than a book of religious poetry, and that is a book of jokes." As Whalen put it, "I go look at the world and it is/flat./the beautiful things are beautiful/the ugly things are ugly/I/have been wasting my time." There are much worse ways to waste time. This is a beautiful book. ■



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Helen Adam's "Come Over the Stream Charlie," circa 1957

A Nurse of Enchantment

by ANGE MLINKO

The publication of *A Helen Adam Reader* is of historical interest, feminist interest—and poetic interest. Adam belonged to the avant-garde, but she was not a formal innovator. Unlike Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, she never issued edicts about making it new or there being no ideas but in things. And while she did lead an unconventional life, she was too eccentric to be valorized as a "role model." Born in Peeblesshire, Scotland, in 1909, Adam was a teenage poet whose Victorian fairy ballads captivated the British public and earned the praise of the Queen of England. Reviewers lauded her "perfect ear" and "delicate imagination." The composer Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, who had collaborated with Tennyson, adapted Adam's first book, *The Elfin Pedlar*, to music, and performed it with orchestras all over Europe. But this fame, and Adam's posh Victorian girlhood, vanished into the past in 1939 when Adam, who lived with her mother and sister until their deaths, immigrated to the United States virtually by accident. The three women had traveled from London to

A Helen Adam Reader
Edited by Kristin Prevallet.
National Poetry Foundation. 492 pp. $29.95.

Ange Mlinko's poems and articles have appeared in The Nation, *the* Village Voice *and* Poetry. *Her latest book of poems is* Starred Wire.

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Hartford, Connecticut, for a wedding; two months later World War II broke out, and relatives warned them against returning to a city of blackouts and rations.

The watershed moment of Adam's creative life came in the late 1940s, when her mother's health problems prompted a move west, first to Reno and then to San Francisco. In the Bay Area, Adam quickly found herself a member—some said godmother, witch or Nurse of Enchantment—of the interlocking Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer poetry circles, which, with the Beats, formed the avant-garde San Francisco Renaissance. After several years, she decided to move to New York to adapt her apocalyptic play *San Francisco's Burning* for Broadway. It was a bust. Adam spent her later years playing, in the words of her biographer Kristin Prevallet, the "eccentric Grand Dame to the New York art and poetry scene," gradually succumbing to a paranoia that she had run afoul of Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead. After her sister Pat died, Adam became a recluse. She faded away, dying in a Brooklyn nursing home in 1993.

Adam was included in the landmark anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* but was dropped by its editor, Donald Allen, when the volume was reissued as *The Postmoderns* in 1982. Adam's previous collections were only partial and have been out of print for decades. Her possessions were lost when she died a ward of the state, and by the merest of chances they were acquired in a warehouse sale by a used bookstore owner whose manager recognized the cache of poetry and papers. As her things arrived piecemeal to their archival home at SUNY, Buffalo, Prevallet used them to reconstruct Adam's equally fragmented, enigmatic life and work. Helen Adam may not have been a Modernist giant, but Prevallet's *Reader* makes the case that she must be taken on her own terms: as a balladeer, playwright, collagist and necromancer.

Adam wrote to raise gooseflesh. Her brand of ballad derived from the northern regions of Scotland, where minstrels evoked the grue (whence our "gruesome"). The grue manifests itself physiologically in the audience's shiver: the authenticity of a bodily response is the outward sign of the performer's otherworldly power. Helen Adam had, as they say, "it," as in these lines from "Kiltory":

> "Come hither, my lady, lie doun wi' your dear.
> A rival sae braw I ha' reason tae fear.
> Come lie wi' your true love for ten starry nights.
> I'll grudge ye nae hour o' your stolen delights."
>
> Tae the dead man he flung her. He nailed up the door.
> "Kiltory, I wish ye the joy o' your whore!"
> Awa in the woodlands the wild throstles cried,
> And the waters ran red on the brant mountain-side.

Adam combined the narrative economy of ballads—where each line is a discrete unit of information—with the lush sonic tapestry we associate with older Anglo-Saxon and Celtic strains of British verse. It's not just in the way she wields the Lallans dialect (those wi's and ha's, sae's and braw's), trimming consonants to highlight the more musical vowels. Nor does her art boil down to the exotic word choice—"throstle" (with its associations of "thistle," "jostle" and "throttle") over the more English "thrush," for example. She could turn a phrase like "Kiltory rides hunting though love bids him stay"—a nutshell description of the huntsman—or deploy a descriptive prowess verging on the ornamental. On the page, Adam's intricate sound-

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scapes compare with anything by Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas. But to see her sing her ballads—she chants "Kiltory" on the *Reader*'s accompanying DVD—is to appreciate how the language, trilling and seething by turns, possessed its acolyte. Adam gets so lost in it, she dances a jig to her own bloodthirsty tale.

When Adam settled in San Francisco, she found herself among various avant-gardes dedicated not only to overthrowing the shackles of the East Coast literary establishment but also to founding a new social order. In true anarchist fashion, San Francisco would merely be a landscape for a plethora of interlocking "magic kingdom" households, co-ops and communities. Several of the older generation of poets and artists—Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson—had met at Waldport, Oregon, the detention camp for conscientious objectors during World War II. (Morris Graves and William Stafford were fellow detainees. Rexroth wrote about the experience in this magazine, in 1957.) After the war, the artists who had met and theorized in a government camp influenced a younger, restless, Romantic generation that, amid the general prosperity, sought to imagine a society and a poetry in which humanity could flourish and be free.

One of those poets was Robert Duncan. Thirty-five years old, he was already on his way to being one of the most complex poets of his time: native Californian/midcentury Modernist; alumnus of the maverick Black Mountain College in North Carolina; writer of one of the first homosexual liberation manifestoes ("The Homosexual in Society," 1944); a mystic with an encyclopedic mind, absorbing everything from Homer to Marx into what he would term the "grand collage" of his poetry. When Helen Adam landed in his class at the Poetry Center in 1954, the effect was literally electrifying—classmates recalled a thunderstorm erupting at the moment Adam chanted William Blake's "Introduction to the Songs of Experience" from memory for him.

Prevallet is eloquent on the seeming contradictions embodied by the Duncan-Adam alliance:

> It was, after all, by freeing poetry from the shackles of traditional forms that this generation of writers hoped to help create a world where individual freedom would take precedence over allegiance to tradition, country, and literary merit. By sticking to predictable meters and rarely varying her rhythmic structure or rhyming quatrains, Adam seemed to be writing against her time. Within a milieu of artistic innovation and rebellion, where could the ballad tradition possibly fit in?

Duncan was surprised by the force of her influence: "What was important was not the accomplishment of the poem but the wonder of the world of the poem itself, breaking the husk of my modernist pride and shame, my conviction that what mattered was the literary or artistic achievement."

"The husk of my modernist pride and shame"—extraordinary words coming from this disciple of Stein and Pound and H.D. *A Helen Adam Reader* is chockablock with marvels, but none are more marvelous than the publication of the correspondence between Duncan and Adam in 1955, when he had left for a sojourn in Mallorca. They exchanged poems, news and encouragement; it was during this time that Duncan wrote his visionary masterpiece, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," which opens his breakthrough volume *The Opening of the Field*. He sent a draft of it to Adam, who recognized its genius: "It is flawless, one of the very loveliest things you have ever done." Encountering this privileged moment gives the reader a different sort of shiver, not of grue but of whatever its counterpart among the angels is.

Adam also cast a spell over austere, uncompromising Jack Spicer. This conjunction was even stranger, on the surface: Spicer worshiped virile boys, Billy the Kid, Federico García Lorca. But his interest in folklore and ballads preceded their acquaintance (he had even assisted Harry Smith in compiling what would become the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, which would occasion yet another ballad revival, in the '60s, courtesy of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, among others). Spicer was struck by Adam's rejection of the folky and fey, her chthonic appeal to the grue. No hippie she, in these lines from "I Love My Love":

> There was a man who married a maid. She laughed as he led her home.
> The living fleece of her long bright hair she combed with a golden comb.
> He led her home through his barley fields where the saffron poppies grew.
> She combed, and whispered, "I love my love." Her voice like a plaintive coo.
> Ha! Ha!
> Her voice like a plaintive coo.

How different the ballad's "Ha! Ha!" from the Romantic odist's "O!" (Think of Shelley: "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being.") The note of mockery imbedded in the nuptial scene is but a foreshadowing of horror: in the climactic stanza "The hair rushed in.... It swarmed upon him, it swaddled him fast, it muffled his every groan":

> Like a golden monster it seized his flesh, and then it sought the bone,
> Ha! Ha!
> And then it sought the bone.

Like "the living fleece" of her protagonist's golden hair, Helen Adam's grue is animated by primordial femaleness. Even when monstrous acts are committed by the men in her verses, they are driven by and against the femme fatale's generative power. The collages she made (some of which are reproduced in the *Reader* and the DVD) show coiffed models from advertising pages juxtaposed with insects and rodents—the teeming life of the earth.

Simple

for Aaron Korkegian

Complex systems can arise
from simple rules.

It's not
that we *want* to survive,
it's that we've been drugged
and made to act
as if we do

while all the while
the sea breaks
and rolls, painlessly, under.

If we're not copying it,
we're lonely.

Is this the knowledge
that demands to be
passed down?

Time is made from swatches
of heaven and hell.

If we're not killing it,
we're hungry.

RAE ARMANTROUT

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Some might detect a whiff of misogyny in the approbation of these overwhelmingly homosocial and –sexual poets for a balladeer who portrayed woman's power as unremittingly monstrous. And while it's true that her acceptance into the inner circles gave her pleasure and encouragement, it also came with a price. Michael Davidson's groundbreaking history *The San Francisco Renaissance* relates a famous episode to which Adam was a witness: In 1957 poet Denise Levertov traveled to the Bay Area for the first time and was fêted at a party thrown by Robert Duncan, with whom she had been in close correspondence for several years. There were readings from local poets, including Jack Spicer, who read from a new series called *Admonitions*. "People who don't like the smell of faggot vomit/Will never understand why men don't like women," he began. "The female genital organ is hideous." Spicer had ambushed the celebrated poet.

That night, Davidson writes, Adam had a dream. In Duncan's retelling of it, "she was delivering messages—she was [actually] a messenger in the financial district—and she'd go knock at each office door and they'd open it, and she'd hand them an envelope and she'd say, 'I'm sorry, but I'm a woman,' all night long at different offices." Davidson observes that Adam occupied a privileged space precisely because "she was neither poetic innovator nor sexual threat." Adam was a free spirit, a nonpareil—but would anyone term her a genius, like Duncan? A hero, like Spicer?

The moment of ferment ran its course. Friendships disintegrated, Spicer died, financial problems set in. Adam moved to New York in 1965. There, she became known for her riveting performances, opening for Patti Smith and singing at the Poetry Project New Year's Day Marathons. And she threw memorable dinner parties, where she read the Tarot for her guests.

What Duncan's and Spicer's enthusiasm had in common was the belief that Helen Adam was the real thing—a link to an authentic past and authentic power. For two Modernists who sought to "make it new," this seems like a contradiction. That is, until one remembers that the avatars of the Romantic movement, Wordsworth and Coleridge, wanted to start a revolution with *Lyrical Ballads*. Poetic innovation and ballad revivals were made for each other: the one tending toward all the bad traits we associate with the avant-garde—obscurity, theory, solipsism—and the other pulling it from the brink with its emphasis on dialogue, reportage and violation. When ballads, like horror movie monsters, return from the cultural grave, we know something uncanny is afoot. If zombies lack individuality in their relentless march upon the living, ballads likewise seem to extinguish the lyrical "voice" (a poetry workshop term gone stale) and run on regular centipede feet. In an interview, Adam admitted, "One critic called me a pre-Christian poet, which I think is nice…most of my poems are about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

So how, exactly, did the primal terror of Adam's vision square with the utopian hopes of a "heavenly city," the pacifism and humanism at the root of the San Francisco Renaissance? Was this antihumanism the real crux of her appeal across different sensibilities? Why? As Prevallet notes, Duncan linked the grue "with the demotic urge of poets, like dictators, to 'touch upon terror.'" It is in Duncan's essay "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" that we get a clue as to the real function of the grue as it pertains to both poets and dictators. Recalling Hitler in *Triumph of the Will*, Duncan wrote, "This entity, the feeling into which we can be swept out of our individual realities into belonging to the demos, is the creation of an enthralling speech." The avant-garde needed Adam not only because she was Romantic, authentic and transgressive. They needed her example to unite their own fractured poetics, their own wounded demos. Despite herself, Helen Adam showed them how to be one again; she exerted authority, and they recognized it. From "Counting Out Rhyme":

> Then cam' the unicorn, brichter than the mune,
> Prancing frae the wave wi' his braw crystal croon.
>
> Up the crisp and shelly strand he trotted unafraid.
> Agin' the lanesome lassie's knee his comely head he laid.
>
> Upon the youngest sister's lap he leaned his royal head.
> She stabbed him tae the hert, and Oh! how eagerly he bled!

Now we can read Adam's poems for ourselves and judge whether Duncan was right that "what was important was not the accomplishment of the poem but the wonder of the world of the poem itself." She may not have invented a new form, but she did create a world. ■

NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Russell Banks and friend, 2007

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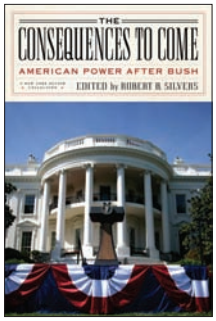

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tially helpless or downtrodden, but they are colored with chalk pastels. His men are pure Fauve.

Banks is also a man's writer because he is so frighteningly adept at what amounts to neurological cross-sections of the male psyche, particularly the patrilineal dimensions of a working-class variety of emotional brutality. His men, often caught in dead-end lives in forlorn dead-end New England mill towns, want desperately to go somewhere but lack the means or a suitable vehicle, and while spinning their wheels, end up only flinging mud in every direction. The writer knows how to draw a bead on tragedy.

In *Affliction* (1989), he constructs a Molotov cocktail of a novel centered on a doomed loser named Wade Whitehouse, and for more than 300 careful pages he fills the bottle with gas and rags and then anoints it with a lit match. Whitehouse is the kind of man we are not predisposed to understand, as he is constitutionally resistant to understanding himself. But Banks nonetheless fits him out with a full-blooded humanity, and finally we understand too much—about how an ability to love, if not installed during childhood, is like a motor with no belt drive.

Banks accomplishes this, as usual, by methodically amassing concrete details: all that machinery, lovingly attended to by the writer because it is similarly cared for by his characters; in the case of Wade Whitehouse, the neat motif of a recurrent toothache, its pain level a barometer of its sufferer's emotional weather and its violent end a symbol of his inability to read the meteorological report.

Banks excels at depicting lives that are unraveling: starting from a place where they are already half undone, a fact known to all but those to whom it is happening; there's still some hope left in them, but we watch from the outside as the yarn gets pulled and the stitches come undone and finally there's nothing left but a pile of loose fibers. The people realize too late that they've been present at their own undoing. Banks's best genre, plied in both novel and short story, is domestic tragedy.

Yet Banks is also possessed of what is termed a social conscience, and he cannot content himself with personal drama alone. There are pressing global issues to make people aware of, goddamn it, the kind everyone seems to persist in ignoring. The buildup of steam from Banks's incredulity that we are all so obscenely self-involved gives his bigger novels their propulsive force. Or at least their undercurrent of impatience. In *Continental Drift* (1985), he sets two different stories in motion—that of Bob Dubois, oil burner repairman from the depopulated darks of central New Hampshire, and that of Vanise Dorsinville of Haiti, victim of brutish forces both bigger and smaller than she—and with only faintly visible saw and hammer marks in his structure, he builds a spectacular collision for them in the end. Here, too, the male lead is meticulously drawn, emotional shading well worked over until it assumes myriad black depths:

> He stands on the slippery sidewalk next to his station wagon, now a long white mound, and stares at the bar across the street, studies the small red neon sign flashing Irwin's name at him like a beacon through the falling snow, then gazes up at the darkened blank windows of Doris's apartment. His bear-like head droops, and glancing at the salt-covered pickup truck, cold and empty, still parked in front of his car, as if deserted in an old war, he looks down Depot Street toward the cannery and the river, and then back up Depot Street to Main. This is his whole world. He knows every square inch of its surface. For a second he studies the candy canes dangling from the lampposts, when all of a sudden, without a thought of it, he doubles up his right fist and holds it out in front of him, as if he were holding a hammer, or as if it were a hammer itself.

Banks can appreciate the simple straight line, too: "Darkness," he writes in *Continental Drift*, "has fallen on them like an attitude."

Yet much as he wants to make Vanise as true and real as Bob—and you sense he very, very much wants that; his profoundly egalitarian values depend on it—Vanise remains vague and foreign, a black-and-white picture of yet one more of the globe's daily atrocities, front-page news today and dumpbound recycling tomorrow.

All this is why Banks's new novel, *The Reserve*, may cause the reader to turn to the title page repeatedly to make sure it actually says "Russell Banks." Well, we can be kind and call it "a departure." The takeoffs begin in the first line: "When finally no one was watching her anymore, the beautiful young woman…" Note, please, that dead adjective, "beautiful." The prose sometimes lumbers on, absent the rocking, steady, naturally powerful pacing that drives Banks's other works; often it seems hard to believe that the author of such humanly compelling

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books as *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991) has created characters who move and speak but do not feel or live.

In a forgiving if not utterly perplexed mood, then, we might think: Ah, this simple style must be meant to convey a mythic feel; perhaps this is going to be one of those tales with a moral, so the literary stuff needs to make way. Yes, perhaps the great practitioner of rich American realism is going to retool himself as a fabulist. That explains the shorter book, too.

The book is set in New York's Adirondacks in the summer of 1936, with forays into the fateful future of 1937; its protagonist, Jordan Groves, is modeled on Rockwell Kent, that titan of the woodcut. From Kent, Banks borrows a combative, self-involved persona, but one whose leftist politics made him a bit of all right; he went to his first socialist meeting when he was 22, and in 1927 he canceled a show at the Worcester Museum so as not to have any "relations of any public nature" with the state of Massachusetts, out of indignation at the Sacco and Vanzetti executions. Also that year he bought 257 acres near Au Sable Forks (Banks's backyard) with a view of Whiteface Mountain, and built a house he named Asgaard, after the Norse home of the gods. (Banks has his version of Kent rejecting the name: "Jordan said no, too pretentious.")

Kent was a social climber even as he espoused populism, and a womanizer although he claimed the moral high ground as his personal acreage. He entertained the artistic intelligentsia but also lived among the "natives" on his tours to Alaska, Greenland and Tierra del Fuego. It is this dichotomy that Banks tries to explore in this character, so he makes Groves a dashing romantic hero in a Waco biplane, full of contempt for the hard-scrabble locals as well as the privileged money-eyed class, on loan from F. Scott Fitzgerald, that populates the exclusive Great Camps of the Adirondacks.

The "reserve" of the title is the Tamarack Wilderness Reserve, a vast private holding for the use of wealthy politicos and industrialists, America's aristocracy. The Reserve is where Groves first makes the acquaintance of the "beautiful" heiress Vanessa Von Heidenstamm, née Cole, a woman we are meant to see as fatally alluring, a siren of amorality in a world noisy with class struggle. But she remains inert on the page no matter how often the author refers to her charms—precisely because he primarily refers to her charms. Banks violates the number-one literary injunction to show, not tell, and so we are unmoved by his suggestions that Vanessa is mad, that there is a terrible secret here, and that a great artist is involved in both a personal struggle with his relationship to women and mortal combat with the large issues of the day, because he appears to mention these things in passing. Chunks of undigested exposition ("Neither servant nor boss, the Adirondack guides were throwbacks to men of an earlier era, when the region had not yet been settled by white people—solitary, self-sufficient hunters and trappers and woodsmen who thought of themselves as living off the land, regardless of who owned title to it") nestle next to throwaway constructions ("Their passion rose slowly"). Jordan and Vanessa never lift off as successfully as the biplane does. In fact, only in the passages devoted to flying—there's that loving gaze on the mysteries of internal combustion again—does the prose vibrate in the old Banks style.

It is impossible to read about Banks and his work without encountering a comparison to Theodore Dreiser, so let me continue the tradition. And it is apt, since the earlier master of social realism's great novel *An American Tragedy* also projects matters of class and money against the screen of an Adirondacks murder that was carried out less in cold blood than in a trap laid by circumstances out of the perpetrator's control. Sort of. Yet while Dreiser made his crime complex, both personal and bearing the weight of social ethics, thus worthy of the term "tragic," Banks—by dressing his characters in costumes and greasepaint and setting them against a backdrop that looks awfully like a social studies textbook chapter on the rise of fascism in Europe—brings on himself the charge of melodrama instead.

In the first act Banks brings onstage the loaded gun of Jordan Groves's politics, personally confused though they are ("The woman was nothing more than a socialite, for God's sake. A parasite. Come the revolution, no more socialites"), yet by the final curtain it has not only not been fired but has been kicked off into the orchestra pit and forgotten there. Groves enlists to fight in Spain solely to ease a heartache.

With its brief and largely teasing entr'actes showing the near future (and the future ends of his main characters) on the world stage in the forms of the civil war in Spain and the flight of the Hindenburg, with its people set to sleepwalk through its pages, *The Reserve* reads like a sketch for a Banks novel rather than the finished work. If we imagine this happy possibility, we will be imagining a book four times as long, because that is what it would take to fully build motivations that feel organic instead

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of inserted. Humans who speak as humans, and not comic book figures: "'You're sure?' Jordan said. 'She's really dead?'"—this question asked by a man who saw action in World War I and thus would be acquainted with the effect of a "fist-size" overflowing hole in someone's chest. Revelations that are hard won, not bought at the dollar store: "But then she stopped smiling. No, she thought, nothing good or useful could come of what she had done."

Of course, this slightness will be taken for "accessibility," the bargain price everyone can afford, the mark of a commercial novel. But sometimes it's the "big" novel of ideas, the "dark" or "difficult" one—*Continental Drift* comes to mind—that is truly accessible. This is because it telegraphs its aims by the very expansiveness of its structure; it is, after all, hard to do Big on the sly. (And what really are the qualities that make a novel "commercial"? A certain cowardice, perhaps, one that keeps it small not necessarily in length but in risk?) Banks may drop in all the references he wants to unemployment, ominous doings in Germany, Dos Passos and the post-Depression loss of manufacturing in small-town America, but if they remain exactly where they landed, the novel is hardly accessible. It is confusing because it is never made whole.

But *The Reserve* may still be appreciated as a question: an important one, illuminating to pose. Why write, at this moment in time, with an American government that is functionally a corporate dictatorship and the world suffering its usual dose of savagery, about the hopeful period of the New Deal and a creative-intellectual class that was passionately engaged in international affairs, even voluntarily fighting in the Spanish Civil War?

This question is, alas, its own answer. It leads to a depressing moment when you realize that probably few feel compelled to fight fascism abroad now, since it has been all but welcomed at home.

So this, perhaps, is why *The Reserve* feels bloodless next to Banks's previous books: it's driven by his own passionate engagement with injustice, which caused his disengagement with the literary requirements of the novel. In the face of these concerns, Banks's considerable powers of description, his way of calling forth a cinematic richness from his prose, seem to have been squeezed to the very margins of the page, and indeed right off it. There's more that's missing than there is present. And what can you do with a novel that actually contains the phrase, "It was a bright sunshiny day"? There can be only one answer. Look forward to the next. ■

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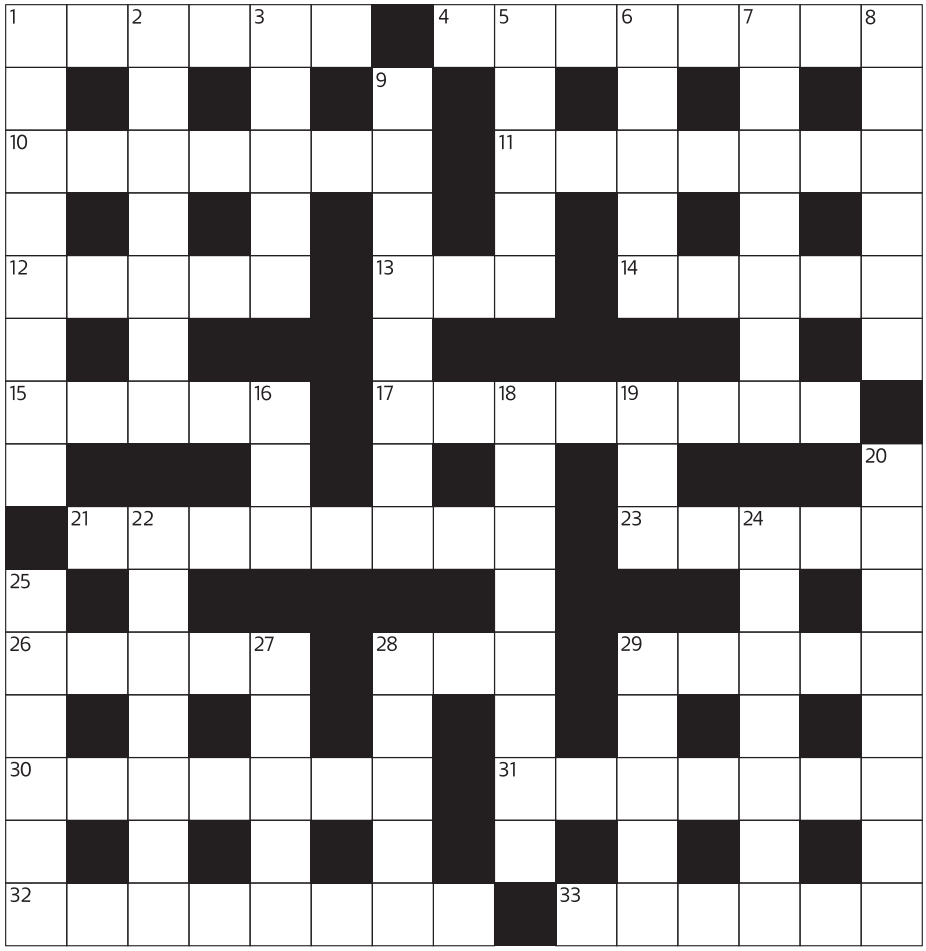

ACROSS

1 Carry off an ordinary sailor type, with what may provide a certain amount of hot air. (6)

4 What one may be expected to do before releasing the dogs of war. (3,5)

10 and **11** What one might watch in France in your own language—but it's just between the British and the French. (7,7)

12,13 and **18** down What Santa did to the socks as well as funny business—but still more funny business. (5,3,8)

14 Comes back like around a certain baseball player—a sort of diver. (5)

15 Nothing in a condition some sales specify, but a good stopping place in hot, dry climes. (5)

17 None is changed, but treated in the old-fashioned way, while being put on a pedestal. (8)

21 Lend rich possibilities for those striking out at an early age. (8)

23 Fragrant resin has a point with a lime squash. (5)

26 Possibly got an answer for this as a Polynesian place, or something you can ride on. (5)

28 Driving from here to be really angry when it goes off. (3)

29 Flipper might make a call for this. (5)

30 In and around a Soviet police chief, the Basques were first this. (7)

31 Talked about one important article in Washington. (7)

32 One might rate things for taxation, but such a stupid type has roses to fling. (8)

33 See 25 down

DOWN

1 Dislike for one particular reading? (8)

2 Possibly canoes, or other places where one looks for shelter. (7)

3 and **22** They keep you in suspense, being in suspense in high places. (5-7)

5 A variety of cedar competed, being on the right track. (5)

6 A different option from 29 across, especially for the bosses. (5)

7 Even scrambled, it has a wheel mark coming up—just on a dare. (7)

8 What the police may be said to do goes around your neck. (6)

9 Whereat a bird is born. (8)

16 and **27** My gal holds a sign up high, showing how many people get paid. (8)

18 See 12 across

19 Such a line is straight, being one of the busy types, reputedly. (3)

20 Only one drink for the physicist, if German? (8)

22 See 3

24 Late commemorative? (A slice of pie, possibly apt to start having this.) (7)

25 and **33** across Hail the nut, at riot for the Scourge of God! (6,3,3)

27 See 16

28 Got an unusual answer for such a display on the floor? (5)

29 It was once plighted, shown by an intro thereto. (5)

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C	O	L	D	W	A	R	■	S	A	W	D	U	S	T
O	■	U	■	A	■	E	■	W	■	A	■	P	■	R
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I	■	A	■	C	■	N	■	P	■	C	■	T	■	A
C	A	T	C	H	■	T	I	P	■	H	E	R	O	D
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They marched for everyone.

Memphis, TN 1968

American Federation of State, County
and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO
www.afscme.org

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